8-2024

Legend Trips and Vernacular Film Theory: Spooky Encounters in TikTok Mediated Legend Trips

Drew Holley
Utah State University

LEGEND TRIPS AND VERNACULAR FILM THEORY: SPOOKY ENCOUNTERS IN TIKTOK MEDIATED LEGEND TRIPS

by

Drew O. Holley

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Folklore

Approved:

_____	_____
Lynne McNeill, Ph.D. Major Professor	Afsane Rezaei, Ph.D. Committee Member
_____	_____
Jeannie Thomas, Ph.D. Committee Member	Mikel Koven, Ph.D. Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2024

ABSTRACT

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by

Drew Holley, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2024

Major Professor: Dr. Lynne S. McNeill
Department: Folklore

In this thesis I looked at how legend tripping is mediated through the affordances of new social technologies and apps, specifically TikTok. Short video formats allowed for folk cinematography to spread legend narratives and at the same time create more visual online landscapes for people to interact with. I defined folk cinematography as the way in which people make videos based on a vernacular level. This has been based on people having more access to video making tools and learning from informal patterns such as trends on sites like TikTok. Because of this, I explored how audiences participate in a variation of legend trip structures of telling stories, performing them at an online legend site, and, quite often, retell the legend at the same time they perform it. I also made connections to how audiences demonstrate belief online through tools that allow for more visible ostension and thus was able to track changes in belief or investment of the online audiences.

(64 pages)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my committee for all of the help and direction. I would have been lost in the Feywilds without it. Thank you for lending me so much patience and knowledge and helping me believe that this would come together even when I had my doubts. Thanks to all the other folklore faculty and students here at USU for letting me bounce ideas around and giving some ideas too.

Thanks Mom and Dad for getting me into the TV shows that inspired some of the passions behind this. Zoey, Cosy, and little Ivar, you soften the hard moments and make them worth it. We made it this far Zoey! I hope you know how much I love you.

Drew Holley

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INTRODUCTION

TRAVERSING TIKTOK'S LANDSCAPES AND LEGENDS

Landscape is intricately tied to the stories we tell. It provides a location for legends to play out and serves as a remembrance, the place itself serving to mark the land as legendary and worthy of future visits. Folklorist Lisa Gabbert points out that visits to legend sites become performative: "Legend-questing participants go to a specific spot not only as a matter of interest or as a tourist activity, but they also go to see if anything might happen and ultimately end up as active participants" (2015, 148). When taken as part of performance with trippers as active participants, online spaces, which are filled with all types of performative genres, adapt legend trips quite well to digital mediums. The goal of my thesis is to explain how legend tripping is extended in new ways into online landscapes, using TikTok as my site of focus since it has become incredibly popular (and divisive) in how it is discussed by users and critics. I also focus on TikTok because of how legend tripping online is different due to the unique affordances of TikTok as a medium. Specifically, TikTok focuses on video as a delivery format for information, connection, and entertainment (all of which can also be transmitted via traditional modes of folklore). And, though I focus on TikTok, it is easy to see how some of these concepts might be taken and applied to further analysis of other forms of social media and new media. My analysis shows that as these forms of media develop, they allow for different types of online legend trips.

Gabbert makes the point that even though the role of landscape is very important to legend, it often goes undiscussed because the genre doesn't concern itself with the

physical (2015, 146). Why is it then that legends existing in the non-physical space are not more prominently the subject of legend trips? I approach this question by suggesting that they *are* taking place, and quite frequently. However, they look very different from what might be considered a classic legend trip. Online landscapes can take on a variety of shapes and every day they evolve with new interaction methods, changes to branding, and algorithms that update how the apps/sites interface with users. For example, social media saw TikTok serve as a sort of pioneer in the realm of short video. With the amount of scrolling the audience participates in, other social media platforms followed TikTok's suit in how they structured their apps' video setups (such as Instagram and Facebook reels).

Space is an important concept here. Early scholars of legend tripping noted that almost all legend trips exhibit a three-part structure. The first part is where the legend is told, the second is where it is ritually performed, and third is where it is retold. (Thigpen 1971, 204-205; Ellis 1996, 440). And, there is a space, or physical context to each of these pieces of a legend trip. Though the most obvious interaction with landscape is probably step two as the legend site must be traveled to. As Gabbert points out, space allows for legend trippers to "tap into... [a] supernatural realm" in order to interact with legendary material making the trippers active participants in the legend (2015, 168). When considering a TikTok mediated legend trip, there are a few key ways that the concept of landscape emerges within the social media site.

Screens and Devices as Landscape

First, the physical screens on phones, computers, and TVs are surfaces where legends can play out visually and auditorily for entertainment. This technology also serves as a visual and physical access point for those who use it for social activities. For example, gaming, commenting, stitching, dueting, or sharing videos are actions that add a participatory nature to simply watching, thus taking the first steps towards activating the audience (or making them active participants).

The User's Physical Context as Landscape

Second, I see the physical space surrounding a person as part of the viewing experience. Because of changes in technology the way that we interact with film has changed. We are now longer just sitting in a cinema with dimmed lights, but accessing cinematic events everywhere and anytime. This technology allows for flexibility in things such as audience participation and the setting where they watch, all of which can elicit quite different experiences and changes to viewers' interactions with what they see. These widened opportunities for engagement are aspects of participatory culture which can lend a hand to understand how participation allows for TikTok mediated digital legend trips. Take, for example, the experience of watching a horror movie where you bought a ticket, went to the theater, and sat among only a few other patrons. Then compare that to watching a scary video, one that reports itself to be actual evidence of the existence of ghosts, alone on your couch. This opens up questions of how such landscapes might relate to more institutionally backed found footage films or ghost hunter TV shows. I see these questions tied to convergence culture as conceptualized by

prominent media scholar Henry Jenkins where “any democratic potentials held by grassroots media production and circulation coexist with increasing concentrated mass media” (2014, 270). For now, what I am arguing is that the physical landscapes surrounding the audience as they engage with online legend content, though not reported as a legend site, can be transformed due to the affordances of the technology and based on the interactions of the audience with the technology.

The Visual and Interactive Nature of Apps, Websites, and Landscape

Third, online landscapes can be something as simple as different web pages or apps. Michael Kinsalla discusses the concept of an online legend trip and looks at how webpages make up a digital landscape. Legend trippers are visiting websites or urls and interact with the legend through “narrative immersion,” the “traveling” taking place as they accumulate information about the legend (2011, 100-101). Also, Kinsella’s concept of narrative immersion could be updated to now include apps because of how easily they allow narratives, content creators, and audiences to cross multiple platforms by having a presence on, and switching between apps that provide similar content. Henry Jenkins frames the “flow of content across platforms… and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experience they want” as convergence (2006, 2). And, I think that conceptualizing digital apps, websites, and spaces as landscapes helps the framing of convergence as more than technology shifts but cultural shifts (Jenkins 2006, 3). It does this by placing the focus on the people interacting with the digital landscape rather than by products of technology's influence. Digital landscape can include the way that a web page or app is designed. We

even use language that indicates the sense of physicality in digital realms such as “visiting, traveling to, going to, or accessing” a web page, “getting on or off " of an app or “getting lost” online.

Sometimes digital landscapes mirror corporeal topography. They are designed to look like physical terrain but can’t be accessed except for digitally. The Backrooms are a great example of this. The Backrooms originated as a photo posted to a 4chan thread. The image is of what looks to be an empty office space with yellowish white walls and filled with warm light from LED fluorescent light fixtures (the backrooms 2019). The Backrooms have since developed into a legend themselves, transforming into a never-ending liminal space featured in games, videos, and stories. Switching between sites that house the legend is where this third landscape comes into play because of the different ways that an audience might interact with it. So, what happens in the example of the Backrooms, people's interactions change depending on what app or site they are using. Another example of this online mimicry of physical layouts would be like the landscapes that are represented in video games where an avatar is used to explore the space rather than a physical person, which leads into the fourth landscape.

Image posted to 4chan that became The Backrooms. Taken from 4plebs 4chan archive.

Visual and Interactive Nature of Depicted Landscapes

A final landscape, and the one that I am most interested in for this project and that is closely related to the last online landscape I mentioned, is what I consider a cinematographic landscape that is prevalent in TikTok. These are the landscapes that are represented through the lens of a camera and, because TikTok's main medium for distribution is video, it generates landscapes that are strung together as a user scrolls through them. The user then chooses which ones they will interact with. This happens as they use a physical action to stop scrolling on the tangible plain of the phone screen.They then interact with representations since the video acts as an access point, a conduit to participate in the legend and interact (become active participant) with the content, the content creator, and viewers that have similarly chosen to see the content. I'm mainly interested in this landscape because of how distinct it is due to the affordances of TikTok as a new technology. It is closely tied to the third mentioned landscape because the video does depict a real, tangible, corporeal landscape. Yet, the audience's access, generally, is only through the digital entry that is granted through the video. Sometimes it is not a real landscape, rather it is footage of an avatar traversing a terrain written by computer code. Yet, the video serves as the access for the audience to see the experience of the creator who is controlling the avatar. An example of this might be a TikTok video of someone's stream they have posted of a game they play. These landscapes often roll into each other creating a layered and complex experience for online users and how they might experience a TikTok mediated legend trip.

After establishing the concept of online landscapes and what they look like for TikTok legend trips, we have to consider participatory approaches to the medium that

allow the audience to participate with the legend. One way of thinking about online legends is how they change as they have been adapted from offline to online formats. Folklorist Jeannie Thomas has looked at the relationship of folklore to the speed of internet spread and coined the term “hypermodern folklore” (2015, 7-8). The concept is helpful because it highlights how distinctively TikTok can alter folklore through its transmission, and through cinematic aspects such as visuals, editing, and commenting features.

Participation in a legend is what gives the audience a story to tell about their legend trip —part three of the legend trip (Ellis 1996, 440). Kinsella notes that the internet serves as an “archive” for retellings of the legend; “it actually renews the legend complex… Involvement can be prolonged and can last indefinitely” (2011, 143). When considering the perspective of the audience, the possibility for indefinite involvement is highlighted by the hypermodern element of hypermodern folklore. It is asynchronous, which means that audiences can access the legend at any time. They don’t need the legend teller to be physically or even digitally present to convey the story, because the legend complex is constantly available. Similarly, they can access the digital legend landscape any time and not just the legend.

Constant access assumes that the audience has the capital for entry to participate. In this case capital is technology: phone, screen, internet provider, etc. Thus, we see how TikTok legend trips rely on Robert Glenn Howard’s discussion on digital hybridity between the institutional and the vernacular (2015, 248-249). TikTok and other apps, along with phone companies and internet companies, represent the institutions where people create and receive these products and adapt them to folk practices such as legend

tripping. This can also be linked to the third and forth landscape discussed above. In these landscapes, we see how the interactive features (banners, logos, and messaging) are all provided by the institution, whoever created the app and the device. The content is where we find the more vernacular aspect. The institutional affordances adapted to allow participation in digital legend landscapes might be best framed in the media studies concept of participatory culture. Participatory culture is described as having the following characteristics:

> relatively low barriers to artistic expression… strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices… members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (Jenkins et al. 2005, 3).

Because of the participatory culture surrounding supernatural content on TikTok, it can be seen how TikTok uses Kinsella's adaptation of Thigpen's basic three-step legend trip structure. Artistic expression allows for narrative immersion (2011, 100). The mentorship in participatory culture establishes a pattern for post-legend trip renewal of the legend complex (2011, 143). The important part of participatory culture and its connection to TikTok legend trips is that it helps understand TikTok's ability to position the audience as participants via expression.

Expressiveness is one of the highlights of online spaces. Expressiveness aids the performances of TikTok legend trips because there are performances that go into the making of the videos that audiences interface with, but there are also performances of the audience. For example, the digital landscape is impressed upon by the audience who interact with it through various online ostensive acts, which will be considered in another chapter. This impression is also made through the TikTokers who leave their performative

mark by making videos that serve as materials through which the legend can live on. Thus the videos serve as a form of reverse ostension. Because of the ostensive acts of both parties, they become active participants in the legend. Participatory culture is the basis for which we see how TikTok creators and viewers are accessing creative opportunities, and I hope the concepts in this thesis will show how the clash between participatory culture and consumer culture is an issue with which folklorists should concern themselves.

Throughout my thesis, I will describe a process where the audience watches a video and identify multiple ways TikTok serves to help make online legend trips possible from that viewing. I will do this first by considering how the three-part structure of a legend trip opens up possibilities to generate online interaction. Next, I will consider how digital technologies affect video on social media sites, like TikTok, creating a visual experience and an embodied experience for the audience, one that is patterned after the traditional legend trip. Video and visual experiences on TikTok also help to situate the audience in a film landscape — a space that they can see even if they do not physically inhabit it. The consideration of the digital landscape and the creation of a film landscape allows for hypermodern folklore to engage people in new ways as people participate in folk processes, like the legend trip, without the limitations of the physical space, achieving participation in the legend through a digital space.

CHAPTER ONE

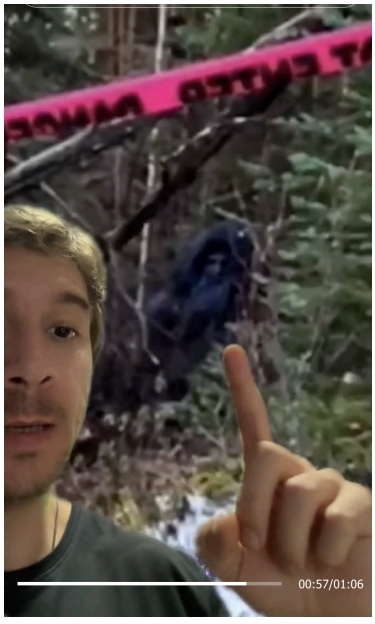
FOLK CINEMATOGRAPHY AND AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE ON TIKTOK

Andrew Peck, writing about digital legends, poses the question of what happens "when people engaging in widespread expressive practices like legend telling and legend tripping encounter new media with built-in affordances that encourage ongoing interpersonal connection and the sharing of everyday communication?" (Peck 2023, 5). New media seems to be the key here, as new forms of media are popping up daily. And so, expressive practices must adapt in a way that allows their spread over media. That is to say, tying it back to concepts of digital landscape, that new media has its own unique landscape that people access in order to perpetuate expressive practices. In regards to TikTok, that can be seen in the ways that creators access editing, cinematography, and other tools in order to tell the legend or perform ostension by creating videos about a legend.

Because of the low bars for participation identified in participatory culture, many people can act as producers. In the same way that others have looked at additions to participatory culture provided by various sites and apps—YouTube and Reddit (Chua 2011, 65; Massanari 2015, 1-2)—I suggest TikTok provides unique expressive forms of participation with a distinct ability for the general public to make videos. Its built-in features include tools that allow a large number of users to film, edit, and distribute videos. Folklorists should be interested in this ability to produce video on the vernacular level, an ability that I refer to as "folk cinematography." Thus, folk cinematography mirrors other vernacular practices in its variation and patterns of dissemination and informal learning. For example, users on TikTok often copy other videos' use of quick

zooms, edit cues with music, or even imitate the camera work of institutionally backed filmmakers like Wes Anderson (Jiménez 2023). Such widespread video making ability opens the question of how media theory applies to this accessible video making process and the folk processes that interest folklorists. This is where convergence culture might be helpful in clarifying how this might look for folklore and the internet "where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways" (Jenkins 2006, 2). Within convergence culture I see opportunity in looking at audience participation with the changes that folk cinematography makes to the audience's experience. I am indicating that the line is blurred between audience and creator through folk cinematography. For example, the popular duet, stitch, and template features on TikTok establish a folk film making pattern. The features allow the audience to watch a video, then make their own video that incorporates the one they just watched. This can either be a response to the video they just watched or their own variation of the narrative using tools such as templates or filters. Users also have the option of stitching a video (remixing the video they

Screenshot from original Squatch Watchers Account 2023



Screenshot from stitched video on That Is Impossible Account 2023

watched by interspersing clips into their own video thus weaving or stitching two videos into one). For example, a recent Bigfoot video from the @nc.squatchwatchers TikTok account shows trail cam footage reporting to be video evidence of Bigfoot (2023). However, there are endless variations of that one video, as Bigfoot seekers have participated by critiquing or explaining other Bigfoot encounters they have had such as James Lafluer, the creator of the "@That's Impossible" channel. He duets the video serving as a sort of tour guide who explains the video and uses his clout to try to give credence to support the original (2023).

As seen in the example above, audience engagement is crucial because it has the power to transform the audience to creator. Hence, audience experience is important to understand. Media scholar Martin Barker, points out the pivotal role investment plays in the audience's experience of a film. He describes investment as "the multifaceted ways in which, and degrees to which, audiences become involved in cultural forms and activities" (2012, 191). So, audiences will have different stakes and interact with videos based on the degree to which they feel some sort of connection. This connection or engagement takes place through the digital or cinematic landscapes discussed earlier and is mediated through the camera lens. And, depending on how the footage is shot, the lens can heighten such investment (Turner 2019, 79).The creation of these landscapes leads to embodiment of the audience in online space and through cinematography. The relationship between camera work, location, and viewer gets audiences to become an active part of the stories that get circulated in the space, or about the space. Of course, the use of the word audience should not connote universal experience, it is not true that all

members will become invested. This is why Barker looks at the experience in relationships to degrees:

> What we are sensing is a scaling of extents of role-playing in parallel with degrees of importance. At one extreme, to see a film is to sit and receive.a virtually empty act… A high level of response is one in which…[the person] commits a part of her or himself to the film, and engages—perhaps a little, perhaps quite fully—at that level…. Above this again, a person can knowingly commit him or herself to a viewing, wanting and expecting a certain kind of involvement…. Finally, above or to the side of this, stands that rare moment of surprise engagement where a film offers more than ever could have been expected (1995, 67).

TikTok might follow a similar pattern, though there are differences. Barker, in this specific context, was looking at the large scale production of the 1995 *Judge Dredd* and how audiences reacted to it. On the other hand many TikToks do not come from such large production efforts and some TikToks might come from sources that are quite obscure. Yet, TikTok viewership might follow a similar pattern where levels of engagement may range from simply scrolling past videos to belief in the legends presented and audience transitions from weather to creator of content thereby extending the reach of a legend.

The mediation of audience experience points to how embodiment works in the settings in which TikTok users might be viewing legend videos. For example, if an audience were to go to a theater and watch a Bigfoot movie, the engagement between the filmmaker and the spectator is mediated through the commercial setting of the theater. An audience can still go and be drawn into the film, the theater itself constituting a liminal space. Yet, when they leave that theater space, the understanding is that the film is a dramatization. Mikel Koven points out that in a cinema setting we might find cinematic ostension where “the legend text is dramatized,” literally “shown” to the spectator in a movie and “recognizes an audience by encouraging some form of postpresentation debate

- regarding the veracity of the legends presented" (2008, 139). The interaction and engagement is also mediated by the landscape, or landscape as participant rather than passive. This can include a phone screen or social media site/app accessible through the phone or computer. Koven recognizes how the term "cinematic ostension" excludes popular media that is not movies and proposes the term "mass mediated ostension" instead (2008, 139). So, when considering these concepts, how might we apply them to someone who is watching Bigfoot footage in a more interactive video setting than a cinema? The Bigfoot TikTok video mentioned above might serve as a good example again when considering this question. It is presented as found footage evidence of Bigfoot, a trail cam that happened to pick him up from a nearby crime scene, not as a production of a film studio. And, it can be viewed in a variety of settings giving the mediation of audience engagement an opportunity to be a more immersive and active experience which can play a heavier role in post-presentation debates about belief.

It would be worth considering commercial feature films that have confused/fooled audiences purporting to be found footage, such as *Blair Witch Project*, and how these found footage formats influence how we examine audience experience. Considering these films might be especially helpful when digging into how they have fooled audiences. I am especially intrigued at how these films have positioned themselves as believed narratives. And, I am curious how they relate to the more interactive formats provided by TikTok. Film scholar Peter Turner discusses found footage movies using the term "the diegetic camera," a camera that exists in the world being depicted in the film:

> the diegetic camera is typically employed to mimic other types of media forms such as documentaries, reality television programmes, and home video… this is an attempt to encourage the viewer to imagine that the artifact that he or she is watching is not a fiction film, or that what is being watched is what non-fiction

> media products look like. The attempt here is to encourage the viewer to respond more strongly to the footage; whether that be to empathize, sympathize, or feel angrier at the characters (2019, 54-55).

This mediation of camera here is significant in aligning the audience in significant ways towards a position of belief, a necessary discussion within the practice of legend tripping and Kinsella's discussion of online legend trips (2011, 128). Koven also points out blurring of belief within found footage films, using Oring's identification of rhetorical devices within legend, pointing out logos and pathos in legend films in the following ways:

> the extraneous details often included in legend narratives work towards grounding the story in our own worlds…. The tone of the film is often crucial to the rhetoric of the truth claims…. Of course, with all these films, the intention is to frighten us. Oring notes that legends are 'more likely to be regarded as true if it conforms to the … *emotional* … expectations of the audience.' The emotional expectation of these films is fear (2013).

TikTok makes the audience's reactions readily available since people can publicly comment on and share the video. And we can see how these rhetorical devices work within a TikTok format. For example, one comment thread from users interacting with the Bigfoot video starts with user @PjG10QB posting, "At first im like, 'cool Bigfoot outfit, believable'.. Then trees start getting tossed around like toothpicks and im like 'oh'.." (November 19, 2023, comment on Squatch Watchers 2023). Because of the lack of information aside from what is visually accessible, it is grounded in our world; the forest could serve as any forest and the emotional expectation is fulfilled, as seen in @PjG10QB's comment, with the surprise and perhaps scary super strength presented.

Because of how accessible TikTok legend videos are and how audiences' interactions are mediated through the camera as well as the TikTok app, I suggest these types of videos intend to produce a sense of realism. And, that blurring the lines of fiction and

non-fiction or belief and non belief could be related back to Barker's discussion of audience investment. Because belief and disbelief may be hard to track, investment may be a more useful term because of how participatory audiences might demonstrate how they "care about their media and cultural engagements" (2012, 191). It's then applicable to TikTok videos as a form of folk cinematography in the way it tries to establish belief, or at the very least, engagement, in the viewer. Peter Turner argues that the diegetic camera acts as its own character directed by the cameraman as an actor in the narrative (2019, 55-56). Building on this, the gaze of the audience is directed through the camera. Turning again to the Bigfoot example, the audience interacts with the trail camera footage as it is presented as real and are primed for belief due to the framing of the footage as evidence. The audience's view is limited by the camera, they might strain for a clearer view through the brush (as if they were actually there) but their interaction is mediated by the zoom of the camera as it searches for clarity. They are rewarded, if only marginally, with a slightly closer view but then the gaze is zoomed out. The cinematography, if it could speak, almost seems to say "zoom in: here is a closer view, do you believe now? Well if not, look at this: zoom out." The Bigfoot then lifts a giant log to throw. This mediated interaction places the audience in the cinematographic landscape and then gives them further ability to interact through post-viewing discussion of belief as well as opportunity to share or even make their own video. And, perhaps, this is why media literacies are more important to teach now because of how blurring the lines of real and unreal footage affect these priming of beliefs.

CHAPTER TWO

SHORT VIDEOS, AUDIENCE AND AUTHOR, AND LEGEND TRIP FORMATS

I classify digital landscapes found in TikTok legend tripping in the introduction of this thesis, where I break them down into four types of online landscape that can facilitate legend tripping. In this chapter, I will tie those landscapes to concrete examples to see just how particular they are to short horror TikTok videos as a genre and thus how they deliver a digital legend trip. The first landscape I will be looking at in this section is Kinsella's version of online legend tripping, which is traveling from site to site in order to participate in the legend. It follows the basic three-part legend trip structure (Thigpen 1971, 204-205; Ellis 1996, 440) and focuses on how online landscapes make those parts distinct. I continue to use this structure to look at how TikTok, specifically, might adapt these parts across multiple online sites or apps. Though, I think future analysis could also show how legends make their way between apps and change to best engage viewers. TikTok also expands on Kinsella's initial look at online legend tripping through landscapes that mimic the physical world but can only be accessed online and through cinematic landscapes where the viewer and camera are embodied through the view of the camera lens. The positioning of the audience and camera influences how viewers and creators interact with the landscapes in order to complete an online legend trip. These interactions can vary between how TikTok videos are structured, but they are consistently inviting the audience to play with belief. Basically, short videos generate supernatural experiences for an audience by allowing them to participate in questioning the realness of a video. They open the video, and in essence the legend, for believability. All the audience needs to do is accept, at the very least, the possibility that the legend is real.

And, short TikTok videos are able to convincingly do this because of the visual aspects of TikTok supplying "video evidence."

The basic structure for Kinsella's online legend tripping is formed by people's navigation of websites that explore an online legend (Kinsella 2011, 146). Kinsella uses the example of online collaborative storytelling surrounding interdimensional travel in Ong's Hat New Jersey. He grounds it in an example of a legend trip he experienced through a ghost hunting society's tour of a local haunt and uses the example to establish the basis for online legend trips. First, the online legend tripper is called to investigate. Second, they then "use their imagination as a tool with which to augment their perceptions in hopes of seeking experiential evidence" (Kinsella 2011, 101). On TikTok, this can happen when a user is scrolling and happens to encounter a legend. For example, through my own scrolling I encountered a TikTok legend video posted by @MR.MOVIE where he describes a movie that is so scary that most people could not finish watching it.

Screenshot taken from
MR.MOVIE TikTok account 2023

Supposedly, Netflix released a movie titled *The Untold,* and then released an algorithm report that 96% of watchers could not make it past the nine minute mark (2023). This isn't the only internet claim out there about the existence of a cursed movie, scary to the point where it is unfinishable. It's also a classic contemporary legend style hoax; the cursed movie claim, in relation to *The Untold*, is untrue. There is no Netflix movie *Untold* and in fact @MR.MOVIE's whole channel is dedicated to reviewing made-up movies. However, the visuals—a

movie poster with a shrouded figure bathed in orange light with a title card claiming it as "a horrifyingly true story"—mixed with the review of @MR.MOVIE who claims to have watched the movie (as he holds his "algorithm report" which is actually a paper labeled, in barely noticeable print, "South Jersey Cat Clinic") pique the interest of the viewer. The discovery process on TikTok mirrors Kinsella's first and second steps in the online legend trip where there is a call to investigate —watch the non-existent movie—and at the same time it supplies the "experiential evidences" the viewer is using to access their imagination (Kinsella 2011, 101).

TikTok also adds the affordance that people can participate in the legend as creators of film. For example, @MR.MOVIE participates by creating a fictitious version of the cursed film legend. So, the creator of the video is the creator of the landscape. The filming of the video allows them to access the landscape of the legend as well, if not more so, than the viewer. Their participation is just different in that it comes from a world-creating perspective, rather than from the perspective of the viewer who is immersed and may perpetuate the world-building. Andrew Peck points to this creatively collaborative process in regards to how online users interact with Slenderman through movie making. There is a relation to ostensive practice, and he notes one particular fan made Slenderman video in which "shared artifacts feed back into the larger body of ostensive practice. As a result, through this demonstration of vernacular knowledge, this video is asserting what this user feels makes for a good ostensive document, one worthy of sharing on social media…. This video also encourages future collaboration from other users" (2018, 60). When looking at videos as a way of accessing landscapes, these online legend trips could be considered part of ostensive practice as discussed by Peck. This is

especially true as Kinsella points out that the online legend trip relies on the collaboration of people interested in the legend as, “legend complexes often refer to one another in order to develop authority…. In online environments, the more these narrative worlds interconnect, the more likely people will encounter them through hypertext linkage” (2011, 101).

For TikTok, this hypertextuality looks a little different as TikTok’s recommendation algorithm is designed to get videos similar to ones that users have interacted with and put them in front of those users. Recommendation algorithms, as a part of online communication, bend traditional human to human interactions by becoming “participant in chains of communication, whose utterances are created individually, while always already the product of human users’ utterances” (Flinterud 2023, 456). In addition to the interests and actions of human participants, the recommendation algorithm gets a say in what other videos users are linked to. This gives great power to the recommendation algorithm that may be a little more lopsided than just “As an utterer… creat[ing] utterances that the receivers understand and find relevant (Flinterud 2023, 456). Especially when there appear to be little to no checks on what content the algorithm can and can’t push. Thus, “satisfied users” consuming “more relevant content” (Flinterud 2023, 441) might not be what is best for users. This can be pointed out in the case behind multiple lawsuits relating to content being delivered to young audiences with suicide ideation (Carville 2023; Crawford 2023). The role of the recommendation algorithm as an active participant in mediating content, though not at the heart of my exploration of legend trips, is important in the context of the hyperlinking of legend texts. And, it might help address the “unknown audience” versus the human connectedness in legend telling

(Dégh 2001, 115) as people try to game the algorithm using hashtags or dueting in order to reach a specific audience who will watch, like, and interact with their video. In fact, the recommendation algorithm's role in the construction of this thesis should be noted in how it shaped the videos that showed up in my For You Page. Its potential to identify my account as part of a specific audience could push specific videos in my direction such as the videos that were related to the cursed video legend, or other searches of mine looking for online legends.

In thinking about recommendation algorithm's relation to hypertext and legend, it might see that a user has watched a video about a legend and then bring up videos that show a variation of the legend. For example, as I continued to scroll, I was given more and more videos about movies that were too scary to finish, lists of scariest movies according to algorithm data, or videos that were banned or too cursed to watch. This was the case with a video that shortly showed up on my For-You-Page (each user's personalized "front page" of the app), reporting the (real) film *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* (2007) as too cursed to watch (@Horror Stories + Videos 2021). There is something to be said about the unintentionality of this approach to online legend tripping, where the algorithm does the collecting and curating of information. It may be noted that perhaps there needs to be some form of intentionality when it comes to legend tripping, and this is especially the case for online legend tripping. The internet legend tripper needs to seek out the legend, but the recommendation algorithm is doing the work of "interpretive drift," which serves as "a means with which to… have supranormal experiences" (Kinsella 2011, 101).

However, once the user begins to engage that curiosity sparked by the video the algorithm has brought them, then they become active participants. For example, the video, with its label of "view at your own risk," (@Horror Stories + Videos 2021) might lead the user to search the internet for more about *The Poughkeepsie Tapes*. Or, the viewer might find other variations of a legend about videos unfit for human eyes. Here, the creator claims *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* is a banned film. This assertion could be in reference to how the film's release date kept getting pulled (Donavan 2016). The film does mimic the format of snuff films which are quite taboo. Regardless, it plays on believability, and in taking a clip from the actual movie, the TikTok video positions itself as forbidden and thus the viewer, for a short time, enters the realm of dark and mysterious similar to if they had sought such illicit content on the dark web–yet it's still just TikTok. It is clear how one can draw similarities between this and the adolescents who set their hearts racing by visiting similarly liminal spaces in physical world legend trips.

The style of imitated snuff films doesn't just play a role in making videos feel authentically taboo and place them in the "too disturbing to watch" video legend, but they follow precedents set by similar films that blazed the trail of blurring reality and fiction. Films like *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) or *Faces of Death* (1978) do this through the use of found footage (Turner 2019, 43-44). Found footage is a popular stylization for TikTok because they are easy to make and accessible for many horror TikTok video creators. Found footage also highlights another landscape that aids in the online legend trips, which are landscapes that can only be accessed by going online. The staging of the legend can emphasize this. If a creator of online legend materials, such as TikToks depicting legend narrative, stages a video in an indeterminate landscape then they are

creating narratives linked landscapes only accessible to the viewer through watching their video. Found footage hides the staging a little by making it seem that capturing the legend was accidental or unintentional. As a diegetic genre, it basically includes the viewer as a member of the crew: “This heightened engagement creates empathy between the viewer and the camera operator” (Turner 2019, 119). So, the audience can only access the landscape as the cameraman, or from their point of view. This can be seen in the example of a video posted by the channel @LIGHTS ARE OFF dealing with SCP 096 (2021). SCP foundation, or Secure Contain and Protect, is a fictional agency dedicated to capturing monsters or other threats and maintaining a conspiracy to keep all of this from the public to avoid mass panic. The monsters are then referred to as SCPs accompanied by a number. The evolving story of the SCP foundation relies on collaborative storytelling with SCP wiki users making up, or drawing on already established lore, and generating thousands of monsters and fake documents to accompany them thus following the creation of entire lore through hypertext linkage and access through the interpretive drift described by Kinsella (2011, 58). But these video interactions take it a step further. The evolution of the story has resulted in lots of attention, including YouTube and TikTok accounts dedicated entirely to SCP lore. There is even a video game created under a creative commons license titled *SCP: Containment Breach*

Screenshot taken from @LIGHTS ARE OFF TikTok account 2021.

which is where much of the footage used for staged diegetic camera TikTok videos is taken. In the video posted by the @LIGHTS ARE OFF account, SCP-096, also known as Shy Guy, with his glowing eyes and large maw, chases the camera down a hall to a dead end. As the camera looks back, it appears that Shy Guy is gone, only to cause a jump scare by Shy Guy lunging at the camera from the ceiling (2021). The camera is linked to the view of the audience, meant to draw the viewer in and make the action feel closer and more personal, which makes the jump scare highly effective.

SCP-096 is an internet monster, and so its creation relies on internet lore which doesn't tie it to a particular real world physical space. So, for online legend trippers to access the lore behind this monster, they generally have to participate in the online landscape. The same could be said for other online legends such as The Backrooms, mentioned in the introduction, or even Slenderman, who may be the most well-known of internet monsters, which follow a similar pattern of collaborative storytelling that expands the online landscape and adds to the lore through creation of new content, information, or internet artifacts. In many of these examples, it is the camera perspective that serves as the link to the audience.

There are attempts to bring such legends out of the internet and into real spaces, as well. There are plenty of videos of the Backrooms where a TikTok creator is in a location that is usually filled with people but that is desolate at the time of their visit, leading to claims of finding The Backrooms. One TikTok video posted by user @Alex, presents like a traditional legend trip where a group of adolescent young men appear to sneak into an old Walmart store claiming it to be part of The Backrooms followed by shots of eerily empty store shelves, freezers, check out lines, and blacked out doors and

windows (2022). The audience is brought to the legend site which posits a rather regular location as part of the internet legend as a way of bringing the legend into the physical realm, and so, in a sense, more comprehensible to the legend trippers, to life. Koven notes, in the context of listening or seeing legend narrative used by the *X-Files*, "Rather than accept or reject the veracity of the story, we are invited to ponder the possibilities of what it would mean *if* such a story were true" (2008, 72). This is exactly the invitation that we find in similar legend videos on social media, and especially TikTok, which posits the videos as evidence of the legend. The whole idea is that this space could or couldn't be the Backrooms, and it invokes the legend in a manner that questions its reality as a way of generating more views for a video that otherwise is fairly mundane: just some kids sneaking into an abandoned Walmart.

Screenshot taken from @Alex TikTok account 2022.

Another example of online legends being brought into the real world comes from a Slenderman video posted by the account: @Te atreves a mirar a mis videos. In the video, a cyclist is making a simple video of him testing out a bike in the countryside. It is subtle, but in the background, a lengthy figure with tentacle-like arms emerges from the trees and is silhouetted in the fog (2023). Of course, Slenderman finds his way into real life often through the many ostensive acts performed in the monster's fandom, but this video stands as one of the many evidences submitted in Slenderman's favor for

transgressing the boundary of internet story to reality that makes him a legend. Yet, legend trips to this field, or other sites of Slenderman appearances don't really take place because of inaccessibility of the legend in the physical surroundings; it is *online* where Slenderman can be encountered through videos or video games. The invitation to wonder at the reality of the legend isn't quite as poignant in this example as it is the previous one because the video isn't about an intentional legend trip like the one the teens experience as they explore the empty Walmart. But it does allow a chance for someone to confront the legend of Slenderman, and since it is submitted as evidence of the monster, it provides the audience with the opportunity to experiment with belief much like legend trippers who visit offline sites. Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill both note that the legend of Slenderman has highly successful "qualities of realism and plausibility" that have shifted the character "into the realm of belief, and should be considered within that framework" (2018, 4, 17), meaning that the same could be possible about many of the legends that use aspects of realism and plausibility, one of the hallmarks of TikTok videos.

For these online legends, the definition of real or reality applied to Slenderman by Jeffery A. Tolbert is helpful since the point of this thesis isn't to try to analyze the realness of legends present on TikTok, but rather to look at how realness interacts with belief to allow for people to feasibly perform a TikTok mediated legend trip:

> By 'real' I simply mean narratives that arise within a community and are accepted as parts of that communities culture… regardless of whether they are literally believed….Regardless, then, of the 'real' or 'fictional' status that scholars and others may append to a phenomenon like Slender Man, the monster remains a conscious expression of a culture shared among a particular group of people which bears special significances that depend in part on an understanding of the group context in which the expressive culture arises. In this sense the Slender Man legend is as 'real' as any other (2018, 34-35).

Now, audience members watching TikTok videos of The Backrooms, Slenderman, SCPs, or other legendry with online origins can trace them to specific posts, users, or forums. So, it is hard to say if they will be fully committed to belief. Yet, TikTok contains videos where there are plenty more who believe in the legend such as Bigfoot videos, like the example in chapter 1, or videos of extraterrestrial beings or extra-biological entities. Regardless of the varying levels of belief in these videos, what is important is how the audience interacts with the opportunity to experiment in their belief. Koven frames this sort of experimentation saying, "The experience of belief is more complicated and more fluid. Belief is ludic; instead of a 'suspension of disbelief,' perhaps we should refer to 'playing with belief" (2018, 120). When it comes to legend tripping, the legend trip serves as a space of discovery. Elizabeth Bird notes how youth legend trippers go to legend sites to test the truth of the legend and their own mettle; "they test themselves and their fear of the unknown… in the symbolic frame of the legend-telling, followed by the legend testing…. [and] dare each other to go further and further in testing the superstitions" (1994, 203). Testing the legend is one way legend trippers play with their belief, and TikTok legend trippers use digital ostensive methods to engage in this play. Take the TikTok example given earlier in the chapter of the fake movie *Untold,* where we see people engaging in the comment section about where to find the movie or pointing out movies that they thought were the scariest of all time or that fit the legend of "the movie that is too scary to finish." Some add on to the legend by pushing others to test it and claiming that they themselves already have. One account posted, "Watched to the end. That final scene was rough but overall still nothing bests Exorcist" (@Gladheateher

March 23, 2023, comment on @MR.MOVIE 2023). Another posted, “I got the whole way through but barely I couldn’t sleep for a week and was paranoid and still am I watched this with 8 of my friends and the same them” (@Nacarlia March 26, 2023, comment on @MR.MOVIE 2023). These comments are similar in that they demonstrate a willingness to buy into the overall storyline being created about *Untold* by saying that they beat the odds and finished the supposedly unfinishable. These comments push others to seek out the legend and test it, even though the movie is nonexistent, with the first comment pointing out a movie they feel fits the legend better. The process of audiences engaging in these discussions encouraged by the “legend material” is part of “mass mediated ostension” (Koven 2008, 139). And, it is through mass-mediated ostension that we see TikTok users engaging with legend material and using it as a way to test their online belief about the legend.

In the comment section of the SCP 096 video, users post comments along with the Latin cross emoji as if used as a ward against the video, demonstrating a way of invoking ritual against the legend. One might point out that the use of a cross indicates more of a Christian-centered belief rather than playful belief in SCP-096. Yet, it would also point to the user assuming there is some malevolence or spiritual danger inherent in the video (thus taking the video into the realm of the cursed video legend). Either way, commenting is a way of interacting with the SCP. They thus, “buy in’ at [an] appropriate level… subordinat[ing] belief to action” (Lindahl 1998, 254). For example, there are those who are in the comment section pretending to be part of the SCP foundation. Others are interacting in the comment section by tagging their favorite SCP foundation-based account. Some are interacting by owning up to their reaction to a jump scare.

In fact, this is also how TikTok provides its cinematic landscape. As users scroll and are connected to more legend videos, they use their imagination to interact and use tools such as the comment section, or they duet/create their own video to interact more deeply with videos on the platform. Because the videos are staged, it might call into question the intent of the creator. That is to say, is the point of posting on TikTok not to gain a following, hence, a certain amount of authority, more than to spread legends? To make the discussion even more about commercialization, there is monetary gain to be had from posting legend videos on TikTok. That being said, does this monetization affect how we look at these videos if they are to be considered versions of legend tripping? I've mentioned that part of the reason that found footage on TikTok is because it is easy to replicate; and part of the reason it is used by film studios is because it is cheap to budget and the reward can be quite large as pointed out by Turner looking at popular found footage films. Specifically, Turner notes budget to gross ratio with *Paranormal Activity* being the largest with a 1:12,890 ratio. (2019, 1-2). However, Thomas's use of the term hypermodern folklore is helpful here in understanding how we might accept some of the straddled lines between folklore and media (2015, 7-8). And, it is the staging of new content, even if it is to profit off a legend's popularity, that could be considered ostensive itself. In fact, Koven discusses representations of legends on a screen, giving the legend a visual basis, is the basis for both cinematic and mass mediated ostension (2008, 139). And, the creative process that goes into making a TikTok fits the description of "becoming engrossed in the reality of self-generated-plots" or "literal imitation or performance of narrative" that is important for the ostensive aspects of legend tripping (Gabbert 2015, 163). I venture that the creation of media as legend material serves the

same role as rituals, rites, or other ostensive actions that make up a legend trip in order to experience the supernatural. This experience can be connected through the various forms of ostension which will be tied to TikTok mediated legend trips to bring such legend trips under Andrew Peck's umbrella of ostensive practice (2018, 54) in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

REVERSE OSTENSIVE PRACTICE AND INVOKING TIKTOK LEGENDS

In their examination of legend trips to a gravesite in Rhode Island where locals believe a vampire is buried, folklorists Donald Holly and Casey Cordy mention that legends are invoked through ritual. “To test the legend, legend trippers will often mark their visits with specific activities designed to invoke supernatural powers… thus engaging in ostensive play” (2007, 345). Smaller ostensive acts are layered together to build, or reinforce, the larger ostensive practice of legend tripping. The use of activities such as “consuming alcohol or drugs, performing seances, making offerings, or following other prescribed rituals… urinating on the gravesites, vandalizing tombstones, and performing sexual acts” serve to tempt the legend as they “suggest that perpetrators risk supernatural sanctions” (Holly and Cordy 2007, 345). In online legend tripping, ritual acts take on different forms, rather than physical acts such as consumption or urination, but are also ostensive play. In the last chapter, I mention the role of online discussion, specifically TikTok comment sections, where audiences demonstrate how they play with belief. Activity in comment sections can also demonstrate a form of ostensive play. This makes it important to consider the role of ostensive acts on TikTok and how TikTok legend trips are riddled with them. I look at examples from TikTok highlighting how they correspond to different categories of ostension. Understanding the different forms of ostension that are present in TikTok demonstrates how they affect the audience's legend tripping experience in each part of the three part legend trip structure: from accessing the legend landscape through narrative drift; to performing ritual to invoke the legend or test

other boundaries; and as a way of sharing the experience and passing on the legend to future legend trippers.

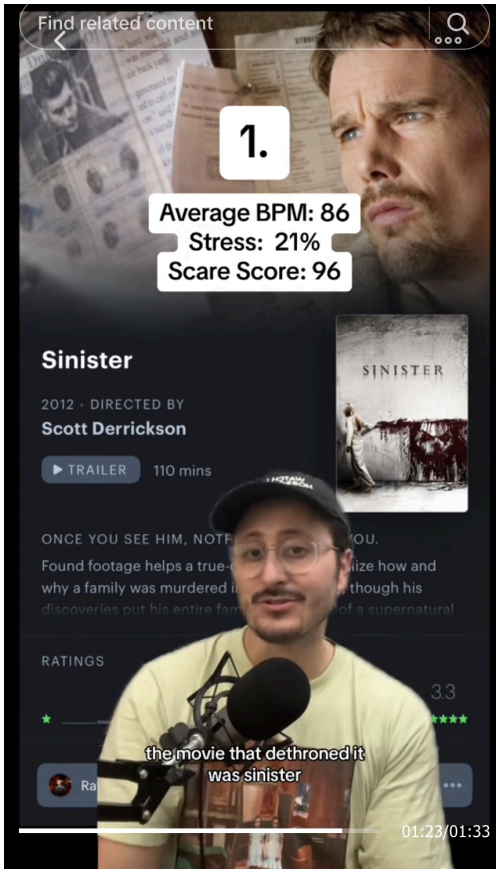
First, we have seen how audiences participate in mass mediated ostension on TikTok through participation in “extratextual” and “textual” debates (Koven 2008, 139) within the comment section. Take the previous example of the Backrooms video, where a group of teen boys break into an abandoned Walmart, expressing that they had entered the Backrooms. The video is met with debates as to whether or not the abandoned Walmart could serve as the Backrooms. Many comments express that they feel the video better resembles SCP 3008—an SCP that is an endless retail store where shoppers go missing as they get lost the further back they go. The debate over the legend leads to the hyperlinking of the two, which can lead TikTokers down the rabbit hole to stumble upon more legends (Kinsella 2011, 101). It should also be pointed out, again, that interactions with such videos will also serve as a source of data for algorithms to pick up on. The algorithm then starts directing users even further down the legend rabbit hole. This is, to an extent, speculative, as we don’t know the specifics of TikTok’s algorithm but can make guesses since there is so much research that is being done to parse out how it affects users and social interactions. This can include anything from how the algorithm is represented in user

Screenshot of comment section. @Alex TikTok account 2022.

identity (Ionescu and Licu 2023), to lack of transparency in recommendation algorithms and yet, how effective they are in mirroring user interests (Wang 2022, 62), which can certainly be seen in the common exclamation, “the algorithm knows me.” Uncertainty about the algorithm can also itself serve as a source for online legend surrounding social media and AI (Klug, Evans, Qin, and Kaufman 2021, 85). These algorithmic effects can be related to, and have implications for, how legends are spreading on TikTok.

The ostensive act of debating the Walmart video’s relation to two online legends doesn’t just hyperlink the two. It could be classified as reverse ostension, as it works to construct the legend itself through making creative materials. That is, performing reverse ostensive practice is the act of generating legend materials that stack on top of each other to build a larger legend. As TikTok users create videos that build off of each other, not only do they participate in interpretive drift, but they also demonstrate two of the pillars of reverse ostension—“Tendency towards collaboration and the appeal to established, recognized genres" (Tolbert 2018, 29; Peck 2023, 111). These pillars can serve as rituals themselves to invoke the legend. The making of a video dealing with a legend serves as a way of (reverse) ostensively playing and acting out a part of the legend. Take, for example, the genre of videos that are cursed or too scary to watch. Earlier, I pointed to a few users making videos rehashing films that fall under the label of cursed/forbidden. The example of legends surrounding cursed videos or films and how audiences engage with them on TikTok does a good job at showing how a legend might be invoked digitally as part of a TikTok legend trip. They also demonstrate just how layered this process can be between reverse and mass mediated ostension. These creators have now acted out the legend in the sense that they have interacted with the cursed videos:

watched, and then edited bits of the video, audio, or still images into their own version of the legend. This form of acting out the legend positions the creators as “introducers” of the legend, bringing new audiences through the legend narrative—and the cinematic landscape they have constructed—as inductees. Another example that might be considered comes from the account @Cinema.Joe, in which @Cinema.Joe discusses a variation of the legend where a list is shown that claims to compile the scariest movies “according to science” (2023). One of these films includes *Sinister* from 2012. The movie itself acts out a variation of the cursed film legend as it revolves around a demon, Baghuul, who accesses the physical world through images and is able to attack the protagonist's (portrayed by Ethan Hawke) family—he draws power from sacrifice of children—through the accidental finding and watching of snuff films made about previous victims. @Cinema.Joe’s use of the movie within his video to create a variation of cursed videos invokes the legend and adds an extra layer, in the sense that he is performing a reverse ostensive act (creating legend material to build the legend of cursed films and generate more narrative of the legend) as he discusses the films in the context of being the scariest of all time. Another layer is



Screenshot from
@Cinema Joe account 2023

added when we look at the mass mediated ostension with the comment section, where people start to engage by laying out their own experiences interacting with the film. It is hard to sort out what to make of this, as Baghuul is a fictional character whose origins we can trace to pop culture, thus the character cannot truly be legend. However, he has the texture of folk—the inspiration coming from narratives surrounding the deity Moloch—since cursed videos actually serve as legends and he plays the role of this folklore in the fictional world of the movie. To be clear, the cursed video legend serves as actual folklore, however Baghuul would be folkloresque (Foster 2016, 5). Regardless, others have then used ostensive play to act out the cursed video legend by making TikTok videos that depict visits of Baghuul, and, in a sense, spread the narrative of a demon that appears to those who see it through images, thus creating their own versions of cursed video legends. And so, the commercialized monster is reintroduced into the "legend cycle by inspiring subsequent acts of collaboration and expression" (Peck 2023, 104). For example, the fact that *Sinister* shows up on @Cinema.Joe's list of movies that are too scary integrates Baghuul into that narrative. Or, other videos made by creators that present Baghuul as the deity of cursed images do this in a similar manner. One video opens with Baghuul flashing on the screen on what appears to be 8mm film. A deep slow AI voice then explains the made-up origins of Baghuul—that he is pagan god that was found on engraved images in the middle ages that would possess those who saw them—without explaining the actual origins as a fictional character. The voice over mixed with the

Screenshot from @Myth&Monsters account 2022

images of Baghuul suggests that to see the demon's likeness has cursed the watcher. (@Myths&Monsters 2022).

The fact that the legend has become mass mediated through films such as *Sinister* demonstrates Peck's point that "mass mediated legends tend to be too narratively complex to lend themselves directly to retellings and are instead 'more influential in the creation and maintenance of the ideology of the legend—the setting of a system of belief on which legends can thrive'" (2023, 104). This is especially true for TikTok because videos must be short, even if TikTok has extended the length allowance for videos, otherwise audiences will scroll past. After all, TikTok specializes in short videos. So, audiences may not be familiar with the demon Baghuul, and their first encounter might be a TikTok version of him. But, they help maintain the "belief on which the legend can thrive" (Dégh 2001, 202) through establishing a theme of: there are some things that should not be seen. Breaking the taboo is to be cursed in some way. Many of these videos are diegetic and regard the audience as active participants, using them as part of the ostensive play of the creator. In this sense, the audience becomes part of the ostensive acts that take place as ritual to invoke the legend, and if purposefully seeking out the legend, are then fulfilling the "acting out" aspect of the legend trip. As can be seen in the @Myths&Monsters video which acts out the legend by editing together the cursed image, adding music, and the voiceover and assumes the audience plays along by reacting to the video.

Finally, the sharing of the legend trip experience is mixed in with the spread of the legend materials that are generated. Kinsella points out how this works in an online environment:

> During the final stage of legend-tripping, participants discursively attempt to make sense of the entire ordeal. This process might seem to signal the ritual's "end," but it actually renews the legend complex and parallels the third stage of interpretive drift wherein interpreted events justify the very frameworks that instigated them. Involvement can be prolonged and can last indefinitely. Since the computer-mediated environment in which the… legend-trip unfolds isn't governed by the immediacy of face-to-face interactions, the negotiations of meaning are preserved as an archive of "accounts of past happenings." Other forms of legend-tripping also convert the communal discussions of what transpired into narratives that become part of the accounts of past happenings, but online, conversations about the legend-trip are verbatim the documentation of the legend-trip. (2011, 143).

This comes from the role of collaboration in reverse ostensive materials. Reverse ostension is one of the ways the internet generates internet lore, and TikTok videos that are submitted as evidence of a legend are part of the reverse ostensive practice. Visual evidence finds itself an especially effective form of generating questions and drawing in audiences into questioning the reality of the legend (Blank and McNeill 2018, 4), and TikTok makes itself especially apt to the process. Because the ostensive practices can stack to build the legend at large, TikTok makes especially good use of building materials since the practices of creating legend videos can serve all three parts of the legend trip: traveling to the sight of legend, acting out the legend, and sharing the experience.

CHAPTER FOUR

TIKTOK LEGEND VIDEO GENRES AND ANALYSIS OF FORMATS

The sheer amount of content that is uploaded every day is so vast that it's impossible to say all horror TikTok videos rely on the same patterns. However it also means, with such a wide breadth of videos that exist, several genres of TikTok videos lend themselves to the creation of legend material. Because creators are trying to generate views, it helps for them to use already established vernacular templates (Peck 2023, 104-105). This is why found footage is heavily used to establish vernacular authority. Other vernacular patterns that are used to this effect include a tour guide style video where the audience is guided through the digital landscape by the video creator—similar, perhaps, to a haunted tour or a dark touristic experience—with the assumption the audience will react accordingly, with jump scares, sharing it with others, or playing along with the legend. Other legends are not tied to specific landscapes, which makes TikTok a good venue to host them: legends of UFOs, conspiracy theories, ghosts, and personal hauntings for example. And, when looking at how these stories inhabit the digital landscape on TikTok—that is to say their circulation, use of video evidence to tell the story, and variation in context they seem to resemble more and more Linda Dégh's description of the extent of legends:

> It is seldom a consistent epic; more often it is a kaleidoscopic conglomerate of motifs that seem to be put together by a momentary whim, often with carefree sloppiness. Short or long, the legend appears to be improvised, combining or confusing personal experiences of the past and the present. The worst of all is that variants seem to be generated by stressing one particular incident—causing great diversity simply through de-emphasizing or completely dropping the other parts of the master story (the type). Single incidents (motifs) can have an independent life, and then link up with other parts; but more often, the background—the general context—reveals their connection to a story. (2001, 49).

This chapter will look at these genres and how their formats resemble the diegetic camera, tour, and non-specified landscapes. It is worth noting that these are fluid categories and videos can use multiple formats to establish vernacular authority. Using these pre-established vernacular patterns strengthens the rhetorical relationship between the creators, audience, and material that helps guide the audience through a TikTok legend trip.

Highlighting the formats, as will be done in this chapter, aids to show how digital folk practices have transitioned as new media materials become available. That is to say that TikTok creators are developing vernacular authority through folk practice and combining it with genre to create a legend trip experience. Of course, some elements of digital legendry such as ostensive practices, online legend telling/spreading, and the creation of material culture obviously existed in online spaces before TikTok, with some sites serving as clear predecessors to TikTok through similarities in video distribution: Vine and YouTube. Kinsella's early examination of digital legend tripping in a text-heavy internet proves that these online folk processes allow for digital legend trips prior to TikTok and on different online formats. But, as TikTok became popular it stretched how people get their information and has tested modern information literacy. The skill of folk cinematography is unique to video-based platforms. Thanks to this new developing digital reality we live in, online legend cycles have been allowed to grow and reach further and be combined with genres of short videos generated by, and more accessible to, much of the folk. Genres of videos also allow for different experiences legend tripping from POV or diegetic camera videos, to tour videos, to videos whose legends do not pertain to a specific articulated location.

Tour/Embodied Experience

TikTok's heavy reliance on the visual inspires lots of different interactions, and TikTokers have developed their own vernacular to describe these. For example, in reaction to seeing a scary TikTok many will comment about hiding in the comments. This is where the person watching will be scared enough of what is happening on the screen that they will take the tab for the comment section and scroll up to make the video screen smaller and partially cover the video literally hiding behind comments to avoid a scare. This could be the digital equivalent of using a friend as a human shield at a legend trip site or hiding behind a blanket or article of clothing. These interactions can be seen as part of the common process of dealing with the perceived reality of the audience and can happen in a video where the audience knows that there is no real threat, a similarity of those who go on legend trips for the thrill rather than actual belief and ritual participation. Creators know this and make their videos using established patterns (hence following a traditional approach to video creation) to adapt their own content. This relationship is apparent in how some videos might be stylized.

One case study that demonstrates this relationship well is a TikTok compilation of three videos that begins with an AI voiceover explaining that these are "three paranormal videos you should never watch alone." So, right off the bat the implication is that watching the videos alone may have negative paranormal consequences thus following the cursed video legend format. Yet this TikTok is layered; it also serves as multiple ghost stories within the cursed video legend. The first video shows a child who is terrified of something unseen in her closet with the mom checking and finding nothing, yet the little girl is adamant that a "grown up person" is smiling at her from the closet. The next is a

classic ouija board video where a group of teenage girls witness a bottle fly off of the table and the chandelier spin. The last is a man who sees shadows pass by the window to his office and confronts a shrouded figure that locks itself in his house and objects start to move as he confronts it (@TerrorTok Official 2023). These videos are particularly effective because ghosts—unless it's a ghost that is a famous resident of a haunt, like Flo in Ogden Cemetery or the Weeping Woman in Logan Cemetery—aren't tied down to specific landscapes. They can house themselves in the closet, cellar, the internet, and in our minds, which makes them particularly good scary creatures for TikTok. Not only does the opening phrase "three videos you shouldn't watch alone" set the tone of the legend, but it establishes the relationship where the author anticipates or directs the actions of the audience. The top comment demonstrates this well, immediately interacting with the creator by noting: "*Proceeds to watch alone*" (@LordofChaos July 21, 2023, comment on @TerrorTok Official 2023).

Screenshot of swinging chandelier. @TerrorTok Official account 2023

When I watched the third video—the one with the shadow that keeps walking past the office—I scrolled away as a way of coping with what I deemed to be too scary and only finished the complete video when I decided to use it for this analysis. I don't like the idea of being watched, so the way the video is framed as a watchful presence that becomes more aggressive resonated with me, and I scrolled past to avoid the feeling of being watched and the anxiousness packaged into the video. Audience's reactions to such videos vary. Some people might feel their heart rate rising, palms getting clammy, and

muscles tensing up before the scare. Others might profess no feelings of being scared, a reaction which I would compare to the testing of one's mettle or even testing “bravery and manhood in front of an admiring female audience,” as in Bird's analysis of legend trip performances of youth (1994, 204). I would speculate that the gender dynamics play out a little differently in an online environment since it might allow for more inclusive groups to meet over the legend material but it would take much more research directed at that specific aspect of the topic to verify. Regardless, the video is rife with comments discussing the experience of watching the video while hiding in the comments. These comments demonstrate the vernacular surrounding the videos and can act as a form of ostensive interaction, hence providing an example of the folk process on TikTok. My own experience of continuing to scroll past the video also serves as an ostensive way of warding off the fear—“acting out” part of the legend. The action of scrolling past the material I found scary as a result of the viewing experience, and the collective posts about hiding in the comments demonstrate the levels of audience investment of these viewing performances. Yet, both highlight ostensive practice and show how filmmaker, film and spectator connect are part of a performance process similar to the recreation of a legend narrative that would be found on any other legend trip. Thus, film, in this case TikToks, reach the same level of performance as what might be suggested by the term “performative landscape” in the sense the “landscapes do” and has a participatory role in legend trips (Gabbert 2015, 161-162.)

Diegetic Camera

The use of vernacular patterns found on TikTok, specifically the use of diegetic cameras, could be linked to Turner's discussion of empathy and heightening the audience's investment and perhaps embodiment in the viewing experience. Turner says that a diegetic camera suggests specific messages to the audience, "aiming to convince the audience that what he or she is watching is non-fiction footage captured by a camera in the hands of… a character within the diegesis. This priming encourages viewers to react with stronger feelings of fear and dread and empathy for camera-operating character" (2019, 79). This is seen in the example of the little girl who has a ghost in her closet. The comments suggest many commenters' heightened empathy for the family along with belief that a malicious force is present in the video and could spread outside of that particular closet. For example, one comment sympathizes, "The first video is very genuine because a child never lie. She is so scared and I am sad for her" (@Tadicha B Guyo Boru August 25, 2023, comment on @TerrorTok Official 2023). Another suggests the possibility of similar experiences: "I was sleeping with my niece one day and she woke me up at 6am in the morning saying that there's a boy wearing a blue school uniform watching us" (@Cammy July 24, 2023, comment on @TerrorTok Official 2023). These responses show how well these patterns work when looking at the anticipated relationship that TikTok creators are using in order to get views. This evidence-based approach to genres generates views but interactions in

Screenshot of girl pointing out ghost in the closet. @TerrorTok Official account 2023

the form of comments and reposts which is picked up by the algorithm which then shoves the content in front of more faces spreading the legends faster and faster.

Non-specified Landscapes

UFO videos are a particularly interesting genre of legend trip encounters on TikTok. Dégh gives some insight to how they fit into a "cycle of legends" (1971, 55) while discussing legend and belief noting that they highlight a few key points in the relationship of legend and social factors:

> Like all other basic forms of narration, the legend corresponds to a basic mental attitude composed of conscious and unconscious functions… social and historical changes may influence the nature of the legend more than they do any other genre… the legend conceived in our technological age can be the vehicle of new ideas…. Hence, the social elements of the legend, the new climate that stimulates , evolves, carries, and maintains modern legends becomes increasingly important (1971, 59-60).

These aspects of legend, and UFO narratives' ability to highlight them, make TikTok videos surrounding UFOs perhaps more relevant than ever. For example, the current climate surrounding space travel is punctuated by events such as billionaire's escapism in phallic looking spacecraft as opposed to ordinary folks' "escapism in times of frustration" (Dégh 1971, 59). We have also experienced anxiety over government interest in extra-biological entities (E.B.E.) in congressional hearings. Mixing social climate with the new technology of social media sites, such as TikTok, shows lots of potential for how they make UFO videos potent material for TikTok legend trips. Similar to ghost encounters, UFO encounters are a type of legend cycle that can happen anywhere and at any time. There are a few physical places that UFOs directly are tied to, such as Roswell, New Mexico, or Sherman Ranch in Ballard, Utah, where enthusiasts might make a

pilgrimage or legend trip to. In fact, most UFO encounters are reported without a specific location in mind, though population does seem to play a role in the number of reports (Misra 2015). This makes TikTok a great place for UFO legends to be circulated, as it allows access to anyone seeking UFO stories. Part of this is because we see the continued use of pre-established vernacular patterns to generate views and authority. Similar to how Slenderman videos are generated as a sort of material culture and submitted as evidence, UFO videos function as a piece of proof to engage audience interaction. This engagement forces the audience to decide if they believe the legend. And, much like how stories that are second hand "my father heard it from my grandfather' leaves the door open for some doubt," (Degh 2001, 67) videos posted to TikTok invite doubt while also inviting the audience to decide the level of investment.

Many of these videos are not necessarily point of view perspectives as found footage, but still diegetic and act as if they are leaked footage or filmed by a lucky, or unlucky, bystander who happened to be in the right place at the right time. One variation I have noticed is that security camera footage sometimes is positioned as leaked footage from government sites and some technologies have been used to similar effects. Smart doorbells pick up motion and can catch things that humans have missed, or dash cameras can pick up things, and, upon review, it shows something that humans previously missed. One video uses a compilation of footage taken from what looks like doorbell cameras, police body cam footage, property

Screenshot from
@DarkMoose account 2023

cameras, and new footage to create a narrative of a UFO crash and aliens spotted in a local's back yard. It starts with the creator popping in and out of the screen explaining the different videos' perspectives to thread them together into one narrative. A doorbell camera footage is used to suggest a flash of blue lights and large explosive sound are the crashing UFO. It jumps to what is assumed to be footage captured by a property camera in a backyard showing some humanoid creature with exaggerated features hunched over as a voice over of an apparent 911 call informs police of alien looking creatures trespassing in the backyard (@DarkMoose 2023). There is a lot that is unclear about the video. First, are all of the clips created and then compiled by the TikTok account as a way of interacting with UFO and alien stories? Or, do they come from multiple sources and the compilation with the addition of the narrator serving as the interaction? This information could be important in determining the extent to which transmission is prevalent in genres of video that are diegetic. Still, they show the TikTok creator going through the ostensive practice of performing the UFO legends in order to be part of the narrative. I suggest that TikTok creators are thinking more about the intrasubjective reactions, thinking about the cumulative effect of the viewing experience where it will go viral because of shock, belief, or even anger if the video is proved to be a hoax. But virality could also establish space for people to seek out a specific alien video—such as footage actually released by

Screenshot from
@DarkMoose account 2023

government archives (U.S. Department of Defense 2020)—and TikTokers might hope that their video becomes *the* video to visit. Hence, their performance of the legend relies on the established patterns to make it more believable in hope others will engage in a TikTok mediate legend trip.

In a video about UFOs or extra-terrestrial (E.T.) encounters, one might encounter a jump scare meant for a quick shock to the audience, or a video that attempts to create more lasting interaction with the audience, such as a follower for the Tiktok channel or further investigation into the phenomenon. Part of this relies on belief, or at least using the audience's willingness to play with belief to insert into the video the premise that the events of the legend actually happened. Because they still serve as diegetic, the camera is treated as a part of the story or as an agent out in the world capturing evidence, confirming Turner's analysis of how it relates to audiences by raising their investment, because they are watching "non-fiction footage" (2019, 79). The creator once again is anticipating audience reactions, whether or not they consciously realize that TikTok videos using these styles will be picked up by users and boosted by algorithms to keep audiences scrolling. This process could be compared to the pre-telling of the legend that invests the legend tripper in the site as worth visiting (Ellis 1996, 440)

In the end, it is our curiosity that gets the better of us. It leads us to push the boundaries and test ourselves in scary situations, even if it means that we hide in the comments or scroll away and then come back. The suggestion is to watch the video, because, even if it is cursed, or even if we will encounter other worldly beings, it gives us an experience that is unique and gives life some spice outside of our regular viewing habits.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have pointed to ways that TikTok plays a role in online legend tripping in an attempt to demonstrate the role of new media in changing folk forms and processes. I hope that the examples shared not only demonstrate a new way of thinking about legend tripping, but also a new way that folklorists might think about online landscapes. I have relied on an interdisciplinary perspective centering film and video as a particularly expressive form. I have also drawn on media studies to understand participatory culture and how it relates to film in an attempt to bring those concepts into the realm of folklore. The product, I hope, is a greater understanding of how online legend cycles are shifting and adapting to new technologies.

Audience investment is helpful in framing the relationship between audience, filmmaker, and video (Barker 2012, 191). This is necessary to understand how these relationships are shifting because of technology's influence on filmmaker, audience, and video. Participatory culture allows for the audience and filmmaker to be dynamic positions (Jenkins et al. 2005, 12). Audiences can cross the boundary of a seat in a theater due to technological allowances. They have access to cameras and editing, which allows them to become filmmakers as they respond to TikTok videos they have seen as a viewer. When dealing with folklore content, this expanded ability allows the folk to more fully participate in distributing their creative content. TikTok has also allowed many people to participate in video making based off of trends and patterns and making their own variation of certain legends, a process I called “folk cinematography.” These variations help generate excitement and bring viewers more investment to the everyday milieu of

the digital world. It also helps establish vernacular authority to accounts seeking to bring in more views (Peck 2023, 104-105).

I have also proposed that, as part of the relationship between viewer, video maker, and video, TikTok video makers will anticipate the reaction of viewers to be of a participatory nature. This makes TikTok an extremely fertile landscape for post-viewing debates, which are a part of mass-mediated legend trips (Koven 2008, 139). These debates can come through duetting or stitching, both new video-making processes that are foundational to folk cinematography. Or, they can manifest through playing with belief by pretending or engaging with legend materials, as I have demonstrated through examples of comments left in comment sections of videos.

I think there is still room for exploring these concepts more, though they are subjects outside of the scope I have determined in this thesis. I see how legends are told online as an area particularly apt for exploration. For example, there is room for efforts to classify levels of participation in online legends could further be explored and it would be interesting to collect data through surveys or even interviews of those who have participated in TikTok legendary.

Hyperlinking is one of the ways that I see TikTok showing changes in online legend cycles. What I mean is that viewers leave a visible online trail of information as they interact with legends through comments, stitching, and dueting, making the folkloric transmission process more visible and documented. This could be a useful tool for determining levels of variation in legends as they spread. And, lastly, I think my work highlights how recommendation algorithms pose some difficult questions. For example, how much of a role does the algorithm play in spreading legends? Is it valid as folkloric

transmission if it is the algorithm and not the folk spreading legends? Or, are the folk still able to control the algorithm since they control their clicks, watch times, searches, and other data that may be used by an algorithm to curate content? These seem to be concerns of institutional versus vernacular content for folklorists to look at. I think that such questions are just a demonstration of how apps can have an impact on reframing folk processes.

One of the impacts of TikTok I postulated is how we might think of online landscapes' relationships to online legend tripping. This is in regards to how they affect Thigpen's three-part structure of legend trips as adapted by Kinsella (1971, 204; 2011, 9). TikTok provides multiple landscapes. It is very visual and allows the audience to inhabit landscapes that are otherwise impossible to access. Because of these landscapes, viewers can watch the telling of the legend and participate in narrative immersion in a way that makes them quite active through various forms of ostension. I have pointed out reverse ostension and mass-mediated ostension as notable forms of ostension in regards to TikTok legends. Film landscapes also introduce a sense of realism into the viewer's experience as they react physically to the video through jump scares or other bodily responses, similar to scary movies. These responses are heightened by diegetic camera formats (Turner 2019,175). These formats are common on TikTok. Oftentimes they augment reverse ostension as many diegetic camera videos are submitted on TikTok as evidence of the legend and create the opportunity for audiences to then play along and build the legend by responding. This serves as a way for viewers to also invoke the legend and to continue to spread the legend through sharing their own experience. Thus, they complete the last two steps in the three-part legend structure.

I have given examples of these in an effort to show just how distinct TikTok legend tripping can be. Video and visual experiences on TikTok also help to situate the audience in a film landscape — a space that they can see even if they do not physically inhabit it. The consideration of the digital landscape and the creation of a film landscape allows for hypermodern folklore to engage people in new ways as people participate in folk processes, like the legend trip, without the need of using the physical space, rather accessing participation in the legend through a digital space. More work might be done and might be more helpful when looking more closely at specific storylines or legends across platforms. That is to say breaking down the stories further and looking at them where they may not only appear in video format, but on web forms such as fandom wikis or on fanfic websites. This would provide a closer look at the specific story and how fandoms are interacting with them rather than the broad use of TikTok in folk processes.

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