

Digital Hoax-Lore: Aestheticizing Truth and Believability through Fabricated Legend

—The “No More than a Page” Edition—

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The goal of this dissertation project is to develop new language – along with a relatively new frame of thought – for the consideration of certain mass culture materials “disguised” by their authors as “authentic” folklore. The eponymous moniker I have given to these instances of wily categorical appropriation (in the specific context of this project) is “hoax-lore.” I do not position the hoax-lore classification as a set of delimiting parameters intended to demarcate so-called “real” folklore from its “artificial” counterpart; rather, I discuss “hoax-lore” as cultivated using many of the same generic characteristics and contexts used to define the particular folklore form from which many hoaxers seem to most commonly and saliently borrow the aesthetic fundamentals, patterns, and contexts for their own fabricated formulations: folk legendry. Along these lines, I have elected to examine three case studies of (particularly *digital*) hoax legendry:

- The covert marketing campaign which (in secret) precipitated the release of the 1999 *The Blair Witch Project* found footage motion picture. I consider this case study as an instance of “hoax-lore” as guerrilla marketing.
- The inception and rapid international spread of the infamous “EVER DREAM THIS MAN” memetic phenomenon – along with the various concomitant online (and in-person) communities devoted to relevant discourses of theorization, debate, and belief concerning the viral poster. I consider this case study as an instance of “hoax-lore” as performance art.
- The veritable gestalt of multifarious online storytelling forms and styles which together comprise the so-called “Slenderman” mythos. I examine this case study as an example of hoax-lore as a form of collaborative aesthetical curation and participatory, networked storytelling.

Because each of these instances of “hoax-lore” is performed as a kind of legend complex/conduit, the discourses of folkloristic legend scholarship have provided much of the theoretical framework for my approach to this subject, particularly those discussions which (engendered by the context-focused disciplinary shift of the so-called folkloristic “Performance Turn”) have reimagined the legend genre as constituted by a series of interrelated performance scenarios and rituals/behaviors. I focus especially on those theories that have deemphasized the once dominant definitional factors of truth/untruth and actual belief, in part by disentangling my own role as the institutional arbiter of these generic dimensions (I have only selected instances of “hoax-lore” ultimately debunked as “manufactured” by their own creators).

Folkloristics is no stranger to the problematic rhetoric of authenticity. This study of “hoax-lore,” in response to extant disciplinary conversations concerning the “fake” (for instance, Richard Dorson’s “fakelore” along with Hobsbawm and Ranger’s “invented tradition”) and its shifting position within the discipline (for instance, Regina Bendix’s *In Search of Authenticity* along with Foster and Tolbert’s *The Folkloresque*), attempts to reimagine mass culture “artifice” within folklore as an expansion (rather than restriction) of the boundaries of what can be considered folkloric transmission, especially as that transmission can exist in a productive, reciprocal cycle between various cultural levels and groups – in other words, a hybridized instance of Jenkins’s convergence culture in action.