https://doi.org/10.7592/YBBS8.2.03

Ostension and Criminal Legends: Contemporary Horror Tales as Part of Online Youth Lore

Eda Kalmre

Senior researcher at the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu, Estonia

e-mail: eda.kalmre@folklore.ee

Abstract: This article examines the phenomenon of ostension and criminal legends in the context of contemporary horror tales circulating among Estonian youth, particularly through digital media. It explores how narratives about "men in white vans," killer clowns, and Slenderman evolve from online spaces into real-life practices, triggering moral panics and shaping public discourse. Drawing on folklore theory and the concept of ostension, the study analyzes the interplay between oral and digital traditions, media amplification, and participatory culture. The findings highlight how these legends reflect societal fears, identity construction, and the blurred boundaries between fiction and reality in the digital age.

Keywords: ostension, criminal legends, urban legends, digital folklore, participatory culture, moral panic, Slenderman, killer clowns, social media, Estonian youth lore

Panic broke out in the small town of Põlva in south Estonia following a viral social media post about a masked man, some two metres tall, who jumped out of a suspicious white van that he had been driving

> around the town to kidnap a schoolboy. This incident was one of several similar cases that the local police had had to investigate. The girl who had posted the unsettling warning claimed that her teenage brother had been involved in the incident, and he said that other boys had found themselves in similar predicaments as well. Another scary story that circulated in the town cautioned that criminals attacked lone individuals after dark to harvest their organs. (Harju 2018: 1)

The digital space connects us all in a global sphere of tradition, allowing horror tales and the characters therein from all over the world to be adopted easily into the Estonian context. This article was inspired by recent incidents that supposedly took place in Estonia and rumours based on these putative incidents. Two more public cases even led journalists to reach out to the author of this article for a comment. These incidents, and the horror tales they inspire, share a common framework and recurring characters: evil clowns and men in white vans who abduct children. Another common aspect of these narratives is that they are spread by children or teenagers. The source of these stories about allegedly true incidents was invariably online sites and social media platforms. Journalists reporting on several of these cases, and posts on social media, brought the tales to public attention and even led to police investigation.

In folklore studies, these types of narrative are regarded as contemporary elaborations of the legend genre: they are identified as belief-based contemporary legends, popularly called urban legends. The difference between older agrarian legends and modern urban legends lies in the broader scope and range of themes of the latter, as urban legends draw significantly from real life, cinema, video games, popular culture, and online digital content. The repeating patterns in these tales might reference older motifs but are just as likely to include more recent narrative motifs. They often follow rather humorous plotlines, and the narrative style can resemble that of tall tales (see also Kalmre 2013).

The narrative tradition about evil creatures tormenting children hardly represents the lighter side of folktales. Many urban legends mediate sentiments of revenge, violence, or xenophobia and are inspired by or even focus on fear of a violent death. Scholars of contemporary legends acknowledge that the crimes described in the narratives have indeed taken place, although as narrations they have a traditional structure, repeated motifs, and

are unverifiable, and as such are definitely part of folklore, not the reality (Brunvand 2001: 469; Ellis 2003: 197).

How, then, should a folklorist describe these incidents and narratives? How are they formed and spread? This article aims to approach these questions by relying on the genre specificity of legends and so focuses on the rhetoric employed when covering such incidents in traditional and online media. Another intriguing angle is exploring what is known about the origins of these beliefs, tales, characters and collective online creation (i.e. the interplay of digital and oral traditions), as well as society's reactions to these tales.

Ostension and criminal legends

Modern digital solutions have become essential in the study of contemporary legends based on practices, their methods of dissemination, and embeddedness in culture. Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1983) introduced the concept of ostension, borrowed from semiotics (see Eco 1976: 224–226), to convey the associations between legend, its performance, and real-world practices rooted in belief. Their approach combines several, at times synergistic, levels: knowledge of tradition, perception, discourse, and activity. Dégh and Vázsonyi argue that ostensive activities both manifest and construct legend cycles. Indeed, it has been suggested that contemporary legends are not folk tales or popular literature but forms of social behaviour (Ellis 2003: 10).

> An ostension-based approach is usually necessitated by the recurring and symbolic emergence of the contemporary legend tradition on different media channels. This way it is brought closer and becomes more familiar to its listeners, readers, and spectators, shaping their sense of reality and, on occasion, causing them to imitate certain aspects of these narratives. (Kalmre 2013a: 59–60)

Ostension can be divided into different categories, such as pseudo- and proto-ostension, etc. Pseudo-ostension involves a hoax or a practical joke, through which perpetrators enact a legend scenario. Proto-ostension describes situations in which an individual so strongly identifies with the legend that he or she claims it to be their personal experience, in which case the legend acquires the status of memorate. Sometimes a story recounted as an (alleged) experi-

ence of others is presented as a personal experience. While ostensive practices have evolved and proliferated in the contemporary online media sphere, the phenomenon itself is much older and has been characteristic of legends in general. The author has encountered narrators' immersion in the story from the older legend repertoire, such as in speculation surrounding a post-war sausage factory that operated in Tartu, Estonia. Storytellers present their experience as a bridge between the legend plot and the real world, blending stereotypical legend events with real-life events (Kalmre 2013a; see also Metsvahi 2000). Ostensive practices both reflect and construct the legend cycles they inspire. The abovementioned public media phenomena have also been described within the framework of moral panic.[1] After panic breaks out in the community, several forms of ostension may independently emerge and start influencing each other.

Linda Dégh (2001)[2] has adopted a separate term, *criminal ostension*, to categorise contemporary sensational legends: gory, tragic, and frightening narratives that spread via media coverage of events along with the opinions, rumours and comments associated with them. The media publicises these narratives, adding details of the practices to known developments. This is how the subculture of stories about murders and murderers evolves, for example. Killers, their stories, and supporting characters in the story become evened out and stereotyped through media and popular rumour, all of which facilitates variation of the legend tradition (Dégh 2001: 428–440).

Pamela Donovan's (2001, 2004) research on criminal legends emerged around the same time as Degh's approach. According to Donovan, criminal legends function both as social practices and as texts reflecting ontological insecurity. They mediate, individualise, and normalise fears associated with public safety. Donovan has, for example, studied legends of organ theft and the harassment of children in theme park toilets as among these tales. During the early 21st century, such tales circulated mainly through oral transmission, but also via electronic mail and personal networks.

Ostension in the digital age

Since the horror tales and incidents that will be discussed below involve children and adolescents, it is perhaps worth reviewing the functioning and established characteristics of the horror tales involving this particular lore group. This

provides an additional interesting insight as it explains how the idiosyncratic features of this group's lore are reflected in contemporary incidents.

The prevailing view during the first campaign for the collection and analysis of schoolchildren's lore in Estonia in the 1990s was that children's horror tales are an authentic synthetic genre that combines religion, physical movement, and storytelling. This applies to children's activities and tales shared among peers, whether at birthday parties, in boarding schools, or on summer camps, etc. This lore involves predicting the future, summoning spirits, telling scare stories, occasionally playing a fantasy game, pranking or scaring someone, etc. Scholars who studied such material at the time emphasised that even though children's repertoire was shaped both by everyday life and adult folklore, they clearly distinguished narrative truth from reality (Kõiva 1996: 184).

> Although children recount quite spooky stories about supernatural creatures, they emotionally detach themselves from their narratives. The horrors that take place in the tales allow them to expand the boundaries of their emotional experience; however, balancing safety and fear is still part of the fun, allowing those participating to demonstrate bravery and fearlessness. (Vahtramäe 1996: 164)

On the one hand, children's lore reflects their rebellious stance against adult norms, while on the other hand enforcing group solidarity. Telling horror tales and feeling safe in the face of a shared fear experience is not only entertaining but also shapes the social and power dynamics within the group. In a narrative situation, participants enjoy witnessing others' fear and trepidation. (Kalmre 2013: 148–149; Virtanen 1980: 103).

Estonian children's horror lore from the 1960s to 1980s, involving ghosts, spirits, blood-soaked hands, suffocating pantyhose, evil dark men, and bloodsuckers, has since the 1990s been added to reports on contemporary fears about organ theft, murderers, aliens, haunting travellers, and other scary beings inspired by the mass media, television, popular culture, literature and cinema (Hiiemäe 2020). A folklorist cannot help but notice that these modern tales often recycle references and motifs borrowed from the early legend tradition.

The networking and pervasive influence of the digital age have significantly broadened opportunities for ostension. Folklore is no longer merely a local phenomenon, and the internet serves as a perfect channel for disseminating folk tales (as well as rumours and other forms of folklore). The digital distribution

of folktales provides researchers far better opportunities to decode and observe these tales, to understand the cultural biases, social expectations, prejudices, fears, and anxiety that they reflect. While the tales or legends transmitted in oral tradition convey emotions in a coded language, in digital form they are exposed more clearly (see Blank 2009: 9), or perhaps with a greater bias due to the anonymity of the poster. Today's pocket-sized digital media (e.g., smartphones) allows children to document and share a group legend trip to an old house or Halloween pranks played on their friends. Digital imaging and photography have become commonplace and seamlessly integrated into everyday communication practices (Hand 2012: 11).

Both online and offline (or oral) communication are common among children and teenagers, who by nature perform ostensive activities. For this age group, online self-presentation is largely associated with their offline identity creation. This, however, means that as teenagers document and share their daily experiences, they are also sharing their ostensive practices.

A notable example of how digital fiction can transform into a belief that is reinforced by the offline cultural practices of children and youth is the Slenderman phenomenon (or Slender Man), a character created on June 10, 2009 by Something Awful forum user Eric Knudsen (user name Surge) as part of a Photoshopping contest challenging users to create paranormal images. Initially, Surge created two black and white images of children, to which he added a tall, slender, spectral figure wearing a black suit. He later supplemented his submission with snippets of text, supposedly from witnesses, describing abductions of groups of children and giving the character the name The Slender Man. The figure, with its fictitious subtext, quickly became viral and additions to the tale were made on different platforms and in different communities; the story inspired a horror movie and spread into video games (Gasin 2017; Chess 2015).[3] The Slenderman story is a true *creepypasta*, a popular term derived from online slang for horror legends and images spread online (see Blank, McNeill 2015: 5).

In the pre-digital media and internet era, adult folklore influenced the beliefs and narrative tradition of children and young people to some extent and often retrospectively; however, now the digital and visual sphere has largely blurred the lines between different age groups. The Slenderman character emerged from adult online activity and permeated youth and children's folklore. The pop culture products, the film, and video games featuring Slenderman have

become an adult business and an entertainment sensation, but also a collaborative source of beliefs for children and youth.

The Slenderman character has been compared with traditional fairy lore. Since the fictional 'mythology' of Slenderman has evolved outside the narrative canons of folklore studies, the character's appearance, motifs, habits, and abilities are not fixed but change depending on who is telling the story. The storytellers can thus use existing Slenderman tropes and imagery to create new tales. The opportunity to use the ideas of others when offering one's own ideas and experiences has inspired the creative participatory culture that emerged around the Slenderman phenomenon. Digital platforms have made the entire process related to the phenomenon highly visible and easy to spread, as digital communication solutions expand and, at the same time, focus on specific activities, creating new sets of practices.[4]

This set of activities, in which the existing online content of different genres (photos, videos, texts, etc.) becomes mixed with individual creation and experiences on social platforms, could be characterised as participatory culture (see Jenkins 2006). Logically linked digital photography and participatory culture, to which content is added that is not easily verifiable, as is typical of legends, invite users to develop the truth value of narratives (see also Shifman 2014; Kalmre 2022: 33–42).

Although Estonian schoolchildren were aware of Slenderman, the character never gained much popularity locally. Archive sources, however, include some stories recounted by children:

> For a while, I was afraid of Slenderman. He is a man who has not had much luck in life; and he lives in the forest and has tentacles. He is also very tall and, of course, dead. At night, I was afraid that he was watching me through the window, and sometimes when riding my bike through the dark forest in the countryside, I was afraid that he would come and kill me. A friend told me a true story about how two teenagers stabbed a third one nine times to see Slenderman, who lived in the forest. The third teenager died, and the two others went to prison. (Tallinn, girl, age 13) (Hiiemäe 2019: 25–26)

This account, recorded during the 2017–2018 countrywide campaign for collecting school lore, organised by the Estonian Literary Museum among 4th- to 12th-graders, refers to a tragic, true event that took place in Wisconsin, United

States, where two girls lured their friend to the forest and stabbed her. The perpetrators later claimed that they had read about Slenderman online and feared his retribution if they did not attack the friend. Since this incident, the mythological character that had been born online and had so far only scared children, entered the public consciousness and became part of real-world dangers.

Men in white vans

The media example, mentioned at the beginning of this article, informs us that the case in Põlva involving criminals driving around in a van, is not the first of this kind to be investigated by the local police. According to the chief of the police department:

> "For some reason, the 'white van' story and other similar legends have repeatedly emerged specifically in Põlva.… About two years ago, there was a major construction project in the area and the builders drove vans, which started the rumours about white vans snatching people from the streets."
>
> The police chief emphasised that they routinely investigate all reports even when they had reason to believe that they are urban legends. "There's no point admonishing those who spread these tales, as people really do get scared," he noted. "It is our responsibility to inform the community, as people need reassuring that things are not as they are told, that these scare stories are unfounded." (Harju 2018: 2)

At the same time, the news article describes a rather typical transmission pattern of such horror tales from friend to friend to friend.

> The boy had heard horror stories about a white van in another town, so he became scared and ran away.… The boy told his friend about the suspicious-looking man and the van, and the story being passed from one boy to another acquired further alarming details. He also talked to a relative living in that other town about the event, and the latter ended up sharing it on social media. (Harju 2018: 1–2)

Rumours typically spread in waves. The boy's van scare in Põlva may have been prompted by an incident in Harku that had been discussed in the media a year before. Specifically, on November 25, 2017, the Estonian daily *Postimees* (The Postman) published a news story titled "A shocking incident in Harku municipality: masked men pulled a child stepping off of a bus into their van" (Väli 2017). This news was very likely also inspired by the Facebook post. The post was widely shared on social media and reported on all Estonian media channels, including a weekend special news review on Estonian state television. The news article that mediated the rumour described how a schoolchild had been violently pulled into a white van and held hostage. The story was as sensational as it was ambiguous, which is characteristic of rumours. A few days later it turned out that the only truth-based aspect of the story was the fear and the feeling that if something like this would happen, it would be a dire situation. This is probably why the story was shared on social platforms making journalists cover the incident as a cautionary tale in the form of a news story, and why the police became involved. It can be assumed that these very horror tales shared in the media reverberate episodically among local Facebook communities. For example, around the time of the Põlva incident, a similar alarming announcement was posted on the Facebook pages of two other local communities (see *Kambja / Ülenurme Kuulutaja*). Comments to the post demonstrate how a topic that was originally discussed only by children assumed a more serious status after being picked up by adults. Around February 24, 2024, a similar post appeared on the Facebook page of *Melliste Teataja*, a local news outlet in Kastre parish in southern Estonia.[5] This incident will be discussed in further detail towards the end of the article.

Alarming rumours about a white van have circulated across Europe, Scandinavia, and elsewhere for more than a decade, owing to the wide reach of social media. General reports about kidnapping of women and children[6] by criminals in white vans can be found on dozens of English-language media sites, which generally confirm that it is "an urban myth or urban legend", inspired by true life and pop-cultural phenomena (see O'Sullivan 2019; Sambeck 2022). Likewise, in 2012 in Sweden and in 2009 in Australia, during investigations initiated in response to a parents' Facebook posts, the police concluded that it was an urban legend that had no factual foundation and had snowballed on social media. Yet, the tales reflect quite well the collective problems and fears prevalent in society (Burger 2014, 2016).

In the accounts from Europe, the van is generally white because minivans of this colour are simply the most popular. However, this is not always the case: at the 2019 International Society Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR) conference, we discussed the white van phenomenon with Czech folklore researcher Peter Janeček and the Slovak folklorist Zuzana Panczová, who claimed that in Slovakian urban legends the van is usually black. We agreed that in all the three countries, rumours about vans spread mainly in smaller townships and rural areas. The Dutch folklorist and media scholar Peter Burger (2014, 2016) has pointed out that in Great Britain, the white van as the setting of a crime was probably inspired by a popular television series about a white van and its wayward, at times violent, driver.

An evil clown crawled out of the internet

In the 1980s, stories about adults wearing clown costumes and driving around in vans to harass and murder children became popular among youngsters in the United States and Great Britain. Children were telling stories about vans driven by men who were dressed as clowns and lurked around schools, ready to ambush children. The tales made adults concerned enough that they turned to the authorities to have them investigate these reports, yet the investigations remained inconclusive: the police reported that the stories were just children's fabrications. In the United States, the sinister evil clown archetype dates back to 1940s' comics and was popularised by Bozo the Clown from the popular children's television program in the second half of the 20th century. The evolution of the evil clown figure was shaped by the 1970s true-life capture of John Wayne Gacy, a child molester and serial killer who worked as a clown. Gacy had killed over 30 men and boys, even though he never committed his murders in the clown costume. By the 1980s, this archetype of the malevolent, evil, clown was well established in the United States and spread to Western Europe through books, television series, and later also video games (Brunvand 2001: 313—315; see also Van de Winkel 2016).

In the late 1980s or early 1990s, psychologists adopted the term coulrophobia, denoting the fear of clowns. YouTube hosts dozens of videos featuring evil clowns, the purpose of which is to scare viewers. Some of these, such as the clown videos posted on the Italian channel DM Pranks, have spread like wild-

fire. Belgian folklore researcher Aurore Van de Winkel (2016) has noted that coulrophobia narratives circulate in periodic waves. The 2014 surge in France first spread in Western Europe before arriving in Eastern Europe somewhat later. The tale allegedly started from a practical joke in which a masked teenager chased another with a plastic knife. In France, rumours started to spread on social media about one or several people lurking near schools and attacking children. The social media posts triggered active response, with teenagers posting links and images to warn against clowns. In some cases, the rumour intertwined with pre-existing hearsay about vans. For example, in Italy, a story made the rounds about Polish clowns driving around in a van and snatching people from the streets to harvest their organs. It is known that in many cases, the fear of clowns has been exploited in pranking or intimidation, but it has also inspired crimes (see Van de Winkel 2016). Previously, and perhaps even now, clown lore appears to be more prominent in countries that observe Halloween traditions.

In Estonia, the evil clown figure took hold somewhat more slowly than in Western countries. Piip and Tuut and other locally known clowns who entertain children at parties and in hospitals, have become popular relatively recently and are positive and fun characters. Stories about evil clowns, however, have been well known among Estonian schoolchildren at least since 2018, possibly even before that, as the following fragment of a school lore text indicates:

> A long time ago – I think it was in 2016 – there was talk about killer clowns and someone I knew told me about a person dressed as a clown standing outside her friend's window (she lived on the ground floor), holding an axe or something. The clown stood there for a long time, staring at her window, and her parents were at work (it all happened at night as her parents worked nightshifts). She called the police but by the time they arrived, the clown was gone. (Girl, born 2003) (Hiiemäe 2019: 25)

The evil clown character 'hit the streets' relatively recently. On September 25, 2023, a police station in Viljandi received a call from a 14-year-old boy who claimed that he had been pursued by an aggressive clown.

The police responded to the call as high priority and found at the site a group of frightened children running from an imagined clown. On this Monday afternoon, internet officer Elerin Tetsmann noted that for her it was unprecedented that a scare which had started online had manifested at this level in real life,

causing children feel genuine distress and turn to the police. Officer Tetsmann emphasised that the children had done the right thing by contacting the police.

The incident unravelled after a Snapchat joke, which was essentially a horror tale about a clown who allegedly walked around in Kantreküla district in the town of Viljandi and terrorised children. Analysing the local youngsters' conversations allowed the police to conclude that the posts, riddled with obscenities, were made by primary school or older students. Even so, the rumour began to spread among elementary school children who gathered in groups and tried to find the clown late in the evenings. During their search they had met some older students, who further fuelled the scary story so that the younger children were frozen, fearing to go on or return home, and thus sought help from the police (Suurmägi 2023a).

Media coverage

Media reports of incidents involving white vans and evil clowns reflect not only on the assumed criminal aspect and explanations, but also on the broader phenomenon of urban legends: the cases are introduced as internationally known and spread narrative creations. The author of this article has been contacted for an expert commentary (see Harju 2018b; Haav 2023).

The reports do not explore the motivations of the original posters of the scare stories because the incidents take place in small, tight-knit communities where everyone knows everyone else. For instance, the event in Harju municipality was truly scandalous, and even before the police had solved the case social media intervened with public explanations. People shared a fake video of a school harassment case that the original poster had allegedly been involved in, suggesting that his being held in the van was an act of revenge. Public discussions did not directly state that the boy was lying for some reason but speculated extensively about possible motivations for lying about such things (see Raud 2017). The focus of the comments was reflecting on the peculiarities of children's thinking and behaviour and on the reasons why they might fear evil characters or lie about them: children have the propensity to blur fantasy with reality and playfully test the boundaries between fear and safety, in addition to which little lies are allowed as a means of asserting oneself.

> Telling horror tales, excitement, fear, confronting the fear and overcoming it, and deliberately frightening others – all this has always been part of being a child and in many cases persists into adulthood. Evil cultural characters from different time periods like the Red Hand, Freddy Krueger, and Candyman, whom one was supposed to fear but who were captivating, were mentioned by my colleagues. Killer clowns have made regular appearances and disappearances among children over a dozen or so years.… Smartphones have undeniably introduced new fears and anxieties that a middle-aged person like me would not necessarily understand. But I believe I understand this clown phenomenon quite well, and it is not part of the smart digital sphere. It is part of a person growing up and the fantasy that the smart world is essentially destroying. (Suurmägi 2023b)

> "An urban legend? According to psychologists, children are highly inventive and can make use of urban legends to get away with things. Children might find it difficult to change their story, fearing that if a matter this serious has been brought to light and even the police has become involved, they may get seriously admonished, rather than say that it was just a whimsical thought or a lie told to cover one's being late," explains the psychologist commenting on the increasing number of recent cases in which a child's fantasy about a white van has caused public panic. (Väli 2018)

While in the pre-internet era, such horror tales and related practices used to be confined to children's and youth culture, social media communication has now brought these tales and their evil characters to the broader public space. For the new target group, a former children's tale can turn into actual criminal risk. The cases from Harku municipality, Põlva, and Viljandi demonstrate how the playful establishment of social relations and a belief system, which is typical of children's and youth culture, has introduced a different kind of threat (a moral panic) when entering a broader public sphere, and adopts different connotations that paint the outside world as inherently dangerous and criminal. The change of context assigns an incident or a case socio-critical implications, with the current legal and moral norms demanding punishment for a crime that endangers a child's safety or his or her body. I encountered a similar change in meaning when a rumour spread outside a children's lore group. In 2005, an adult

happened to overhear children telling tall tales about torturing cats (throwing them out of their skin) that were supposed to repulse the listener. This resulted in the publication of a socio-critical media piece, claiming that youth are cruel and lost, followed by a criminal investigation, which eventually concluded that such a method of torture is impossible to execute, and it could not have happened. The entire case proved to be an urban legend based on old tall tales, or so-called hunter tales. (See Kalmre 2013)

At least one amusing example, mentioned above, about resolving panic about a van in a small rural area occurred in a social media communication in late February 2024. In terms of the cases here, the author was unable to observe the social media communication between the children concerned, but as mentioned before, she had the chance to witness how an incident triggered by a spontaneous fear of vans among children in a small community near Tartu resolved relatively easily. Interestingly, this is supposedly the first account from Estonia in which the van is reported to be black.

> Poster Carmen: Today between 18:00 and 18:30, a black van was following two girls on the Melliste-Poka road. When the girls started to run, the van sped up and began reversing towards them. Luckily, the girls managed to hide. They said that someone was scanning them with a flashlight from the field and between the trees. Please talk to your kids. Ours were able to run to someone they knew, who later gave them a ride home. Unfortunately, the girls were really shaken and couldn't say what kind of a van it was.
>
> Poster Getter: We happened to be out walking the dog around that exact time on Poka road. We were using a flashlight. There were a few vans driving by. Our daughters were playing with their flashlights too, trying to make light effects in the falling snow. Maybe it was the parked van that was suspicious, and then another van pulled up, and it seemed like they had some kind of technical issue. I'm not saying the girls didn't experience something, but fear can really play tricks on us, and even more so in the dark. So perhaps this was just a misunderstanding?
>
> Poster Carmen: The girls did mention another van, and said that one moved too.

> Commenter Rauno: That was us. My friend had run out of gas. [Added a photo.] (*Melliste Teataja*)

Conclusion

The digital age has made children's and young people's awareness of supernatural and evil characters, along with narratives about them, more general and generalised in the world than ever before. The three types of evil character discussed here – men in white vans, evil or killer clowns, and Slenderman – each have a slightly different background and evolution, yet they all target children as their victims. While killer clowns and Slenderman are mythological beings, men in white vans are real malevolent criminals. Stories surrounding these characters are based on deep-seated fear of being exposed to physical harm, which can be traced back to earlier folk tradition. Analogous are, for example, tales about black Volgas and blood-drives that circulated in the former Soviet Union. The alleged current crimes of evil men in white vans are associated with child molesting and organ theft. The tales seem to tell us something about what is happening in society. Media researcher and folklorist Peter Burger analysed reports on white vans in Dutch online and media sources between 1999 and 2015 and describes in his study the shift in the identity of evil villains over this period from harassing child abusers to Eastern European immigrants, and eventually to Muslims. This sequence of characters reflected the social tensions and fears that emerged in the Netherlands in these years, as well as issues with immigration. (Burger 2014, 2016)

Horror tales involving white vans are fuelled by popular and online culture, including movies, video games, YouTube shorts, any kind of mocking, including memes and pranks. It seems that, for many reasons, these white van stories are more familiar and topical in Estonian children's and youth culture, probably because these tales are based on a more universal (older) horror tale tradition as these threats and stories about evil men luring people into cars have been known in Estonia for almost a century. Less popular here are legends about killer clowns, and especially Slenderman, which resonate more deeply with the Western cultural space; their spread has been shaped solely by digital culture.

Clearly, there is no stopping the emergence of horror tales and incidents associated with them, and every single case requires careful study of the circum-

stances involved. Indeed, there is always a chance that these are fears based on legitimate concerns and adult intervention is absolutely warranted. There are several international examples of how online horror games and tales circulating among children and youth online could have such an impact on them that it leads to life-threatening behaviour, as happened in the Slenderman case.

Ultimately, all the children's horror tales and incidents examined here reflect changes in our contemporary world: the supremacy of the internet and social media and the prevalence of fear in entertainment shape people's belief systems and narrative models, as well as their social relationships. The digital sphere has popularised these tales and the characters in them as universal and impactful and they have a rich and varied digital content that allows different genres and activities to become embedded. Thus they have an undeniably more immediate and profound impact than pre-internet-era horror tales.

Acknowledgements

This article was supported by the Narrative and Belief Aspects of Folklore Studies research project (EKM 8-2/20/3).

Notes

[1]that the shared values, wellbeing, and interests of a community or society are under threat. The threat to society could also be perceived within a social group, often associated with children or teenagers, who are more vulnerable to media influence due to social conditioning and personality.

[2] Linda Dégh conducted legend research in the pre-social media era, and it is based on the influences of written media on narrative creation.

[3] See also *Slender Man*, a 2018 American horror movie, written by David Birke, directed by Sylvain White. Folklore surrounding Slenderman has also been influenced by a YouTube series Marble Hornets (2009) and several video games based on this character.

[4] The Slenderman phenomenon has inspired popular studies (see, e.g., Chess 2015; Mar 2017). In addition, a special issue of the academic journal *Contemporary Legend* (vol. 5, 2015) is dedicated to this topic.

[5] The posts of *Melliste Teataja* are no longer accessible on Facebook; the author has screenshots of these posts and comments.

[6] In Estonia, rumours about people-snatchers in a van seem to belong mostly to children's lore. The author is aware of only two panic tales: In 2012, it was reported that several masked men were driving around in a minibus, intoxicating women and pulling them in the bus (*Virumaa Teataja*, 2012). A year later, the police investigated a puzzling incident in Tartu (Mets 2013).

Online sources

Kambja/Ülenurme Kuulutaja. Facebook.
Melliste Teataja. Facebook.

References

Blank, Trevor J. 2009. *Toward a Conceptual Framework for the Study of Folklore and the Internet. – Folklore and Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, pp. 1–20.

Blank, Trevor J., McNeill, Lynne S. (2015). Boiling Over: Creepypasta, Slender Man, and the New Face of Fear in Folklore. *Contemporary Legend*, series 3, vol. 5, pp. 1–13.

Brunvand, Jan Harold 2001. *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company.

Burger, Peter 2014. *Monsterlijke verhalen. Misdaadsagen in het nieuws ne op webforums als retorische constructies*. Den Haag: Boom Lemma.

Burger, Peter 2016. White Van Stories: Stranger Danger, Rhetoric, and Media. – *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend. 34th International Conference, Tallinn June 28–July 2, 2016*. Tartu/Tallinn: ELM Scholarly Press, pp. 12–13.

Chess, Shira 2015. *Folklore, Horror Stories and the Slender Man: The Development of on Internet Mythology*. New York: Palgrave Pivot.

Cohen, Stanley 1972. *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*. MacGibbon and Kee Ltd.

Contemporary Legend 2015, The Journal of the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research, Special Issue: *The Slender Man*, series 3, vol. 5.

Dégh, Linda 2001. *Legend and Belief. Dialectics of a Folklore Genre*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Dégh, Linda; Vaszonyi, Andrew 1983. Does the Word "Dog" Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend Telling. *Journal of Folklore Research* 20, pp. 5–34.

Donovan, Pamela 2001. Crime Legends in Old and New Media. https://www.academia.edu/68875631/Crime_Legends_in_Old_and_New_Media

Donovan, Pamela 2004. *No Way of Knowing. Crime, Urban Legends and the Internet*. New York & London: Routledge.

Eco, Umberto 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Ellis, Bill 2003. *Aliens, Ghosts and Cults. Legends We Live*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Gasin, Glenn 2017. The Slenderman Legend: Everything you need to know. – *CBC News*, March 6. https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-slenderman-legend-everything-you-need-to-know/

Haav, Margus 2023. Kuidas kuri kloun esimest korda internetist välja puges. (How the evil clown first emerged from the internet) – *Sakala* 30. IX, pp. 8.

Hand, Martin 2012. *Ubiquitous Photography*. Cambridge, UK; Manden, MA: Polity Press.

Harju, Ülle 2018a. Hirmujutt põhjustas kaubikupaanika. (The scare story caused a van panic), *Lõunaleht*, 14; 5. IV, pp. 1–2.

Harju, Ülle 2018b. Ohutud linnalegendid „Luunja kurk", „Salatipesu" jt (Safe urban legends "Cucumbers from Luunja", "Salad dressing" and others), *Lõunaleht*, nr 14; 5. IV, pp. 2.

Hiiemäe, Reet 2019. *Eesti õpilaste üleloomulikud kogemused*. (Estonian schoolchildren's supernatural experiences). Tartu: Eesti Folkloori Instituut, EKM Teaduskirjastus.

Hiiemäe, Reet 2020. Hirmude kirjeldused tänapäeva õpilaspärimuses. Subjektiivse kogemuse ja meediamõju seostest. (Descriptions of fears in contemporary schoolchildren's narratives: On the relationship between subjective experience and media influence), *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 1–2: 80–94.

Jenkins, Henry 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

Kalmre, Eda 2013. On Reality, Truth and Ideologies in the Case of Munchausen Tales. *Folklore*: EJF, 53: 141–158.

Kalmre, Eda 2013a. *The Human Sausage Factory: A Study of Post-War Rumour in Tartu*. Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi.

Kalmre, Eda 2022. Nature Returns: Dolphins and Dinosaurs. On Fake News, Photoshop Urban Legends and Memes during the COVID-19 Lockdown, *Estudis de Literatura Oral Popular (Studies in Oral Folk Literature*), 11: 31–46.

Kõiva, Mare 1996. Siis astu aknalauale. (Then step onto the windowsill), *Mängultpäriselt. Tänapäeva folkloorist II*. M. Kõiva (Ed.). Tartu: Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv & Eesti Keele Instituut, pp. 166–188.

Mar, Alex 2017. Into the woods: how online urban legend Slender Man inspired children to kill, *The Guardian*, Dec 7, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/dec/07/slender-man-into-the-woods-how-an-online-bogeyman-inspired-children-to-kill

Mets, Risto 2013. Tartu naine väidab, et teda vägistati mikrobussis. (Tartu woman claims she was raped in a minibus), *Tartu Postimees* 26. XI. https://tartu.postimees.ee/2610022/tartu-naine-vaidab-et-teda-vagistati-mikrobussis

Metsvahi, Merili 2000. Muistend kui tegelikkus (Legend as reality). *Maa-alused. Pro Folkloristica VII.* Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, pp. 44–59.

O'Sullivan, Donie 2019. A Facebook rumour about white vans is spreading fear across America, *CNN Business, 4.* XII. https://edition.cnn.com/2019/12/04/tech/facebook-white-vans/index.html

Peck, Andrew 2015. At the Modems of Madness: The Slender Man, Ostension, and the Digital Age, *Contemporary Legend*, series 3, vol. 5, pp. 14–37.

Raud, Geidi 2017. „Koolidirektor Harku vallas juhtunust: konkreetse juhtumi taga oli lapse ekslik käitumine" ("School principal on incident in Harku rural municipality: The specific incident was caused by a child's erroneous behavior"), *Õhtuleht*, 27. 11. https://www.ohtuleht.ee/842684/koolidirektor-harku-vallas-juhtunust-konkreetse-juhtumi-taga-oli-lapse-ekslik-kaitumine-

Sambek, Becca van 2021. Where Did the Urban Legend About Serial Killers Stalking Victims in White Vans Come From, *Oxygen. True Crime,* 21. 09. https://www.oxygen.com/the-toolbox-killer/crime-news/serial-killers-in-white-vans-where-did-urban-legend-come-from

Shifman, Limor 2014. The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres, *Journal of Visual Culture*, December (doi:10.177/1470412914546577)

Slender Man, *Wikipedia*. https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slender_Man

Suurmägi, Marko 2023a. Õuduslugu põhjustas Viljandis kesköise paanika (Horror story caused midnight panic in Viljandi), *Sakala,* 27. 09, pp 3.

Suurmägi, Marko 2023b. Tapjakloun on iidne hirm, mitte nutimaailm (The killer clown is an ancient fear, not a fiction story from internet), *Sakala,* 27.09, pp 2.

Vahtramäe, Ell 1996. Vaim, vaim, ilmuta ennast! (Spirit, spirit, reveal yourself), *Mängultpäriselt. Tänapäeva folkloorist II*. M. Kõiva (Ed.). Tartu: Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv & Eesti Keele Instituut, pp. 156–165.

Van De Winkel, Aurore 2016. Hostile Clowns in France, Halloween 2014: A Micro-History of a Legend Cycle, *Contemporary Legend*, series 3, vol. 6, pp. 41–54.

Virtanen, Leea 1980. *Lastenperinne.* (Children lore). Helsingin yliopiston kansanrunoustieteen laitoksen toimite 6. Helsinki: Helsingin yliopiston kansanrunoustieteen laitos.

Virumaa Teataja 2012 = Politsei kinnitusel ei vasta info Rakveres liikuvatest maskidega vägistajatest tõele (Police confirm that the information about masked rapists roaming Rakvere is not true), *Virumaa Teataja,* 9. 07. https://virumaateataja.postimees.ee/901502/politsei-kinnitusel-ei-vasta-info-rakveres-liikuvatest-maskidega-vagistajatest-toele

Väli, Kristjan 2017. Šokeeriv juhtum Harku vallas: varjatud näoga mehed tirisid bussist väljunud lapse kaubikusse (Shocking incident in Harku rural municipality: Men with hidden faces dragged a child off a bus into a van), *Postimees*, 25. 11. https://www.ohtuleht.ee/842392/sokeeriv-juhtum-harku-vallas-varjatud-naoga-mehed-tirisid-bussist-valjunud-lapse-kaubikusse

Väli, Kristjan 2018. Väljamõeldud valge kaubik ja kommionu võivad olla lapse appikarje suurest murest (A fictional white van and candy cane can be a child's cry for help from a great worry), *Õhtuleht,* 16. 05, pp 7.

Eda Kalmre, PhD, senior researcher at the Department of Folkloristics, Estonian Literary Museum (Vanemuise 42, 51003 Tartu). Her main research areas are contemporary legend, rumors, visual folklore, local traditions and oral history

E-mail: eda@folklore.ee

ORCID: 0009-0000-5038-002X