

Thomas Hanslowe

### Musical Horror in *Beware the Slenderman*

True crime is currently experiencing a popular resurgence.<sup>1</sup> Although the genre, which examines the stories behind criminal activity, is often criticized for being exploitative, true crime documentaries such as *Making a Murderer* (2015-), *O.J.: Made in America* (2016), and *The Keepers* (2017) have received widespread popularity and acclaim. In this paper, I question the role musical underscoring and sound design play in guiding the viewer through these often violent and disturbing narratives. Through a close reading of the recent true crime documentary *Beware the Slenderman* (2016), I point toward three sonic strategies that are particularly important to the film. First, I argue that the frequent presence of musical tropes derived from the horror genre helps render real life tragedy into palatable, consumable entertainment. This is counterbalanced by the second of these strategies, the deployment of musical silence during emotional interviews with the suspects' family members, which helps create serious, respectful moments that less "prestigious" true crime frequently lacks. The third strategy blurs the line between "musical horror" and respectful silence through the use of clips from fictional found footage horror films, in which the absence of music is paramount in creating a realistic, *vérité* atmosphere. Although my analysis of the sonic modes employed in *BTS* is not exhaustive, the examination of these particular strategies provides new insights into the role that sound design

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<sup>1</sup> Arwa Mahdawi, "As *Making A Murderer* Returns, is the Obsession With True Crime Turning Nasty?" *The Guardian*, October 16, 2018, accessed January 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/oct/16/making-a-murderer-is-our-obsession-with-true-crime-turning-nasty-serial>.  
Eddie Mullan, "How We Got Hooked On Grisly True Crime," *BBC*, December 6, 2018, accessed January 23, 2019, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20181205-how-we-got-hooked-on-grisly-true-crime>.

and the horror genre play both in this documentary and in the fraught world of true crime as a whole.

### **True Crime and Prestige**

*Beware the Slenderman* is centered around Morgan Geysler and Anissa Weier, two twelve-year-old girls who lured their friend and classmate Peyton Leutner into the woods and attempted to murder her. After the victim was found by a passing bicyclist and rushed to a hospital, Geysler and Weier were picked up on the side of the highway and arrested. Under police interrogation they revealed that they had stabbed their friend under the supposed orders of Slenderman, an online “creepypasta” character who appears as a besuited, faceless humanoid who lives in the woods and abducts children. The term “creepypasta,” refers to both scary stories that are shared by people copying and pasting them on the internet and the characters that populate these stories. In spite of the fact that Slenderman was created by Victor Knudsen in response to a Something Awful Photoshop contest, Geysler and Weier firmly believed in the creature’s existence. Both claim they were worried Slenderman would kill them and their families if they did not carry out the attack, and at the time of their arrest they were attempting to walk hundreds of miles to the Nicolet National Park where they believed they would live in Slenderman’s mansion as his “proxies.” In addition to its examination of the crime itself, *Beware the Slenderman* sets out to reveal how deeply Geysler and Weier believed in this fictional character and to look more broadly at Slenderman as a phenomenon of the digital age.

As Elizabeth Cowie argues, all documentaries are split between film’s ability to create both respectable, knowledge-producing study and entertaining spectacle. Cowie writes,

Documentary film is associated with the serious and has become, in Bill Nichols's words, one of the 'discourses of sobriety' alongside—albeit as a junior player—such discourses as science, economics, politics, education, and the law. Yet for all its seriousness, the documentary film nevertheless involves more disreputable features of cinema usually associated with the entertainment film, namely, the pleasures and fascination of film as spectacle.<sup>2</sup>

This results in a “paradox” between “the fascinating pleasure of recorded reality as both spectacle and knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Cowie draws on Jean Baudrillard to argue that documentaries engage with spectacle by transforming the real into images, which carry “a kind of brute fascination unencumbered by aesthetic, moral, social or political judgements.”<sup>4</sup> However, as Michel Chion reminds us, film is an inherently audiovisual medium.<sup>5</sup> For example, sound, music, and image combine to create the disturbing scene in which we see footage of Geyser and Weier's police confession. Cowie's paradox is clearly evident in the fact that true crime invites us to learn and make judgements about tragic events while relying on the sensational aspects of violent crime, often conjured indirectly by such things as interviews with survivors and perpetrators, to create tension and drama.

Given its sensitive subject matter, it is perhaps unsurprising that the division between highbrow and lowbrow in the true crime genre is especially fraught. The true crime genre encompasses such critically acclaimed and awarded films as *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), which won its director Errol Morris a MacArthur Fellowship “Genius Grant,” to made-for-tv fare

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Cowie, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xxv.

infamous for being a “guilty pleasure,” such as the programs frequently shown on Investigation Discovery. A number of articles discussing the recent influx of acclaimed true crime documentaries comment on this split between the “serious” and the “trashy.” For example, a headline from *E! News* puts yet another name to this binary: “From Trash to Treasure: Pop Culture Has Embraced True Crime and It’s Never Letting Go.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in Sarah Kurchak’s retrospective on *City Confidential* for *The A.V. Club*, she writes,

...television’s explorations of real-life felonies have become high art—or at least upper middlebrow entertainment. Lurid guilty pleasures like *Dates From Hell* and *Killer Kids* might still thrive on the fringes of speciality channels, but they’re becoming increasingly overshadowed by the shame-free public consumption and discussion of thoroughly respectable documentary programs.<sup>7</sup>

This new climate in which true crime is often considered a respectable genre plays an important role in how *Beware the Slenderman* presents its subject matter, musically and otherwise. In many ways, the documentary positions itself as “highbrow” true crime. For example, the trailer mentions that the film was an official selection of the SXSW Film Festival. It is also significant that the documentary was released by HBO, an epicenter of the recent turn toward “prestige” television. It also has been a longstanding distributor of a number of widely praised true crime documentaries, ranging from *Paradise Lost: Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (1996) to *The Jinx* (2015), the latter of which is often cited in articles about the current rise of what might be termed “prestige” true crime documentaries. *BTS* casts itself as a prestige true

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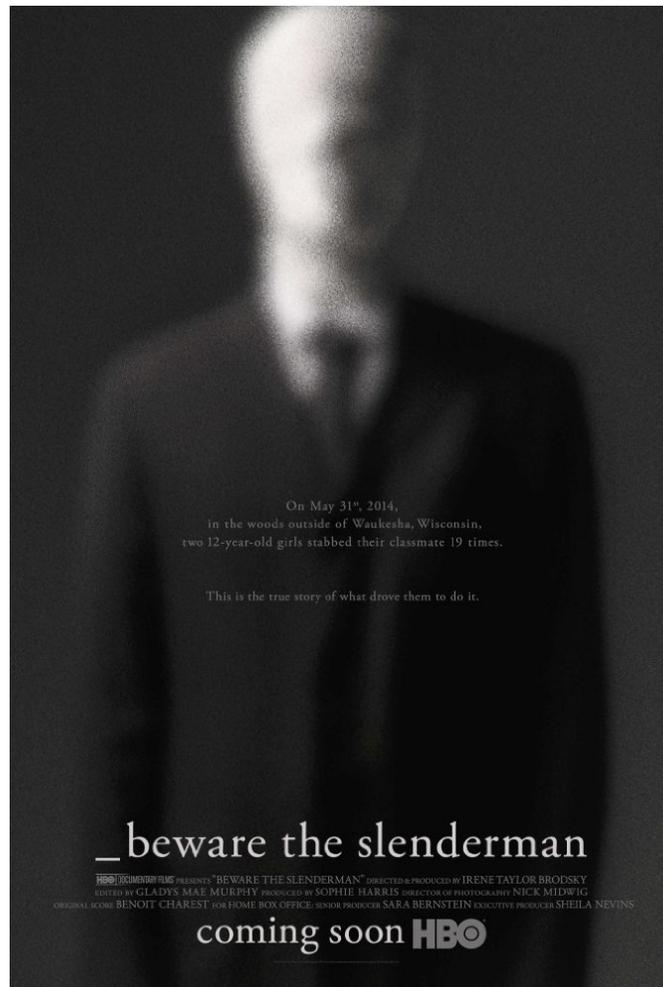
<sup>6</sup> Natalie Finn, “From Trash to Treasure: Pop Culture Has Embraced True Crime and It’s Never Letting Go,” *E! News*, April 11, 2017, accessed June 19, 2017, <http://www.eonline.com/news/842577/from-trash-to-treasure-pop-culture-has-embraced-true-crime-and-it-s-never-letting-go>.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Kurchak, “*City Confidential* was true crime that put the ‘guilty’ in ‘guilty pleasure,’” *A.V. Club*, February 29, 2016, accessed June 19, 2017, <http://www.avclub.com/article/city-confidential-was-true-crime-put-guilty-guilty-231547>.

crime documentary in a number of obvious ways, from its sleek, professional production values to its reliance on interviews with experts and academics, including such prominent figures as Richard Dawkins. Less obvious is the crucial role that music plays both in maintaining this respectability and guiding viewers through moments that evoke the frequently “lowbrow” horror genre.

### **Music and Horror in *Beware the Slenderman***

The elements of horror cinema in *BTS* are most obvious in the film’s treatment of Slenderman. In many ways the film is just as much a documentary about the Slenderman character as it is about the 2014 stabbing. Furthermore, the image of Slenderman played a prominent role in the film’s marketing campaign. For example, the promotional poster for the documentary seen in Figure 1 gives a brief description of the crime in relatively small font, but it is Slenderman’s fearful visage that dominates the image. The trailer for the film also begins with fan-made Slenderman footage and a voice reciting a poem about the character. It is only after this atmospheric evocation of Slenderman that the trailer reveals it is in fact a true crime documentary. The use of Slenderman as the film’s “hook” is perhaps most obvious in its title, which refers to the creepypasta character without any reference to the crime that is nominally the documentary’s primary focus.



**Figure 1: *Beware the Slenderman* Promotional Poster**

The horror genre is also evoked by the musical choices in *Beware the Slenderman*. This is particularly clear in one of the first scenes to explore Slenderman in depth. After a number of experts discuss the creepypasta character’s history and origins, the film indulges in a brief montage of Slenderman fan art sonically accompanied by both a reading of a relatively popular poem about the character and, for this film, uncharacteristically dramatic and unsettling piano music. Part of what makes this scene a musical outlier from the rest of what Chion terms “pit

music,” or “music perceived to be coming from a space and a source outside of the space-time depicted onscreen,” is the fact that this cue was not composed by Charest.<sup>8</sup>

It is in fact a piece entitled *Rising Walls* by a composer known as Myuu who writes music for others to use in their creepypasta projects. Myuu describes the piece as “Dark Piano Music,” and writes that he strives to “make the music sound creepy and beautiful at the same time.”<sup>9</sup> As can be seen in Example 1, the piece is based around slow, rolled piano arpeggios that alternate between G minor and F# augmented to create an eerie effect.



**Example 1: Myuu - *Rising Walls***

This piece is heard in combination with a young girl reciting a poem that contains such morbid images as “He’ll leave your body, not to eat / But to staple your corpse to a tree,” and accompanies a visual montage of clips derived from a wide variety of Slenderman fan art and fan videos. The result is a full-blown audiovisual montage of gothic sounds and images.

Myuu is not the only musician engaged with the conventions of the “horror soundtrack” in *Beware the Slenderman*. Although Charest works with a different sonic pallet than Myuu, his musical choices do not merely associate the Slenderman character with the fictional horror genre,

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Chion, *Film, A Sound Art*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (Chichester, West Sussex and New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 483.

<sup>9</sup> “Rising Walls - myuu,” YouTube video, 5:04, posted by “myuui,” November 27, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqNQJUMhook>.





### Example 3: Ostinato From *Tubular Bells*

Charest's melody bares even stronger similarities to the main theme from John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) seen in Example 4, a melody that was itself inspired by *Tubular Bells*.<sup>10</sup> *Halloween* revolves around Michael Myers, a mysterious masked man who stalks and kills high school students with a large knife. Both motifs place a strong emphasis on eighth note motion between the fifth and first scale degrees, and both venture out to the flattened sixth and other notes from the natural minor scale to create their melodic shapes. All three musical cues make use of similar timbres: high-pitched piano soaked in reverb in the case of *Tubular Bells* and the theme from *Halloween*, and the clear, resonant sound of the celesta in the case of the motif from *BTS*.



### Example 4: Theme from *Halloween*

The musical cue shown in Example 2 thus subtly evokes two horror films that contain plot points with similarities to some of the most disturbing facts about the Slenderman stabbing. As was mentioned above, Michael Myers frequently attacks his victims with a knife, just as Weier and Geyser did in their attack. Furthermore, *The Exorcist* centers around a young girl who is driven to evil when she is possessed by the demon Pazuzu, a situation with clear parallels to the suspects' insistence that they were compelled to violence by the supernatural presence of

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<sup>10</sup> Philip Hayward, "Introduction," in *Terror Tracks: Music, Sound and Horror Cinema* ed. Philip Hayward (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2009), 2.

Slenderman. As Jeffrey Ruoff writes, “By and large, documentary filmmakers have become as rigorous as their Hollywood counterparts in finding musical passages that contribute to the narrative and thematic concerns of their films.”<sup>11</sup> This practice is clearly displayed by Charest’s subtle references to these famous musical cues, which imbues some of the documentary’s most sensitive material with the thrills of horror cinema.

### **Musical Silence in *Beware the Slenderman***

While music emphasizes the documentary’s relationship to the horror genre, this is counterbalanced by sombre moments of musical silence. It is telling that these moments of silence are most conspicuous in emotionally-charged interviews with the suspects’ parents. Perhaps the most obvious and powerful example of this musical silence comes toward the end of the documentary, in an interview with Morgan’s father where he discusses his own experience with schizophrenia and his feelings on hearing that his daughter is also struggling with this mental illness. The emotional weight that this scene carries, as well as its profoundly serious tone, comes not only from the heavy subject matter but also from the lack of musical accompaniment. Indeed, the absence of pit music during this interview almost seems to evoke the image of a respectfully silent listener too sensitive to comment on this intimate and painful scene. Musical silence is a striking feature of nearly every interview with the suspects’ parents. The few exceptions to this rule provide clear examples of music’s role in guiding the viewer between the sombre and the lurid.

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<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey Ruoff, “Conventions of Sound in Documentary,” *Cinematic Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Spring, 1993), 34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225877>.

This is perhaps most obvious in the first interview with Angie Geysler, the mother of one of the suspects. It is the first scene in the film to withhold any sort of musical accompaniment for an extended period of time, and not coincidentally, it is the first scene to sympathetically explore the girls' background. The scene begins with home footage of Morgan Geysler as a baby. As we continue to watch this footage, we begin to hear Geysler's mother describe how much Morgan improved her life. We hear a blend of low-quality audio from the home movies and the professionally recorded interview with Geysler's mother, but there is a noticeable absence of music. This continues as we hear about Morgan's quirky personality and see footage of her playing as a young child. Even when Geysler first describes some of Morgan's more disturbing behavior, the documentary refrains from musical comment. Tellingly, pit music returns just before Geysler begins to discuss her daughter's obsession with Slenderman.

The music begins during a transitional moment. Angie Geysler discusses her daughter's lack of empathy when she first saw the scene in *Bambi* (1942) in which a hunter kills Bambi's mother. The camera lingers on a direct shot of Angie's face as she says that she can think of other times when "[Morgan] hasn't reacted in the way we would expect a little girl to react." Just as this line of dialogue prepares us for a discussion of the darker aspects of Morgan's personality, the eerie music that fades in at this moment signals a return to the topic of Slenderman. We first hear a slowly moving three note motif in the piano against an F# drone heard in the high range of what sounds like a synthesizer. As can be seen in Example 5, the unsettling qualities of this piano figure can be attributed in part to its strong emphasis on the tritone interval between C and F#. The F# drone quickly spreads into a tone cluster, which slowly begins to glissando downward, evoking the sound of a falling Shepard tone. *BTS* thus engages with one of the best known

characteristics of the horror soundtrack, the use of musical techniques adopted from the Western high modernist tradition.



### Example 5: Piano Figure

A few seconds after this music begins, we cut away from the image of Angie Geysler and are presented with clips edited together from several episodes of TribeTwelve, a YouTube series centered around the characters' encounters with Slenderman. Although the original soundtracks of these clips can be heard at a low volume, the dominating sonic feature of this scene is Benoit's original score. TribeTwelve makes frequent use of animated, seemingly handwritten messages to the viewer imposed over heavily processed images of Slenderman and other mysterious characters from the series. These images appear to be processed by taking the black and white negative image and increasing the color contrast, as can be seen in Figure 2.



Figure 2

The cut to the TribeTwelve footage also adds another important sonic dimension to the soundtrack: the sound tropes created for Slenderman by the numerous YouTube series devoted to the character. A running thread in the filmic portrayal of Slenderman is the implication that his and his followers' presence affects camera equipment, resulting in both visual and audible static. Thus a quiet layer of hissing white noise, the primary sonic symbol of Slenderman, is added to Charest's soundtrack. These images coupled with Charest's subdued, unsettling score result in a brief cinematic moment that strongly evokes the horror genre. This also comes with a pregnant pause in Angie Geysler's narration, giving the viewer a full ten seconds to take in these sounds and images. While Angie's sympathetic discussion of her daughter's early childhood is accompanied by a somber silence, the delve into more sensational subject matter involving Morgan's unhealthy obsession with Slenderman is given an appropriately creepy musical cue.

While musical silence is often used to create a serious tone in *Beware the Slenderman*, there is also a moment when this silence suggests the possibility of a particularly dark spectacle: footage of the violent crime itself. The film begins with a scene taken from the popular YouTube series revolving around Slenderman, *Marble Hornets* (2009-14). It is important to note that *Marble Hornets*, as well as most of the other Slenderman clips used in the documentary, make use of the "found footage" framing device made famous by horror films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007). Fictional found footage movies tell their story through video supposedly shot by a character in the film. The resulting lo-fi visual and audio aesthetic and shaky, handheld camera work provide a realism that creates what Xavier Aldana

Reyes describes as a “more participatory viewing experience.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, found footage horror films often strongly resemble documentaries, which frequently make use of genuine found footage.

Although clips of found footage-style Slenderman videos play a prominent role in this documentary, they are usually presented in a way that undercuts any sense of realism they might have had in their original context. Most frequently these Slenderman videos are edited into a montage of very short clips overdubbed with voiceover dialogue and pit music. As Reyes points out, pit music in particular is frequently left out of found footage horror films because it destroys the “hyperrealism” the framing technique creates.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the Slenderman footage used in the first scene of the documentary is presented without any musical underscoring and is thus able to maintain this realistic effect.

This scene is our introduction to the documentary, preceding even the opening credits. We see shaky footage obviously shot on a handheld camera by someone running through a forest at night, and we hear what sounds like a scared young girl yell, “Hey, over here!” Shortly thereafter we see Slenderman standing in the distance and the opening credits begin. Although this scene is brief, its adherence to the conventions of the found footage genre, particularly in the context of this film, makes it very unsettling. The idea that we are seeing a video taken by a girl in the woods has an immediate resonance with the real crime the documentary revolves around, in which a young girl was attacked in the woods. Thus, for just a moment, *Beware the*

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<sup>12</sup> Xavier Aldana Reyes, “The [*REC*] Films: Affective Possibilities and Stylistic Limitations of Found Footage Horror,” in *Digital Horror: Haunted Technologies, Network Panic and the Found Footage Phenomenon*, ed. Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 150.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

*Slenderman* seems to suggest that it might show footage of the attack itself, a suggestion that pit music would undercut.

Although the documentary does not show the attack (an event that presumably was not filmed), the possibility of explicit onscreen violence is certainly part of what creates the morbid fascination that both prestigious and gleefully lowbrow true crime inspires in its audiences.

David T. Johnson finds something similar at work in Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man* (2005), which focuses on Timothy Treadwell, a man who filmed his experiences camping amongst Alaskan grizzly bears before eventually being killed in a bear attack. The audience's knowledge of Treadwell's death while watching the film gives scenes involving close encounters with bears a particular tension. As Johnson writes, "Every potential eruption of violence thus becomes capable of fulfilling a dreadful promise—that Herzog might actually show us this death onscreen."<sup>14</sup> While *Beware the Slenderman* frequently uses music as a way of evoking the horror genre, in this opening scene the absence of music briefly suggests that we might see something truly horrific. Music and its absence strategically guides us from the serious contemplation of this tragic event to the sheer spectacle of *Slenderman* and the bizarre crime the character inspired.

Music plays a crucial role in documentary filmmaking. In the case of recent true crime documentaries, music often helps the audience navigate sensitive subject matter in a way that seems respectful while still drawing on the morbid spectacle and sensationalism that are crucial components of the genre's longstanding popularity. This is just one of many ways that music

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<sup>14</sup> David T. Johnson, "'You Must Never Listen to This': Lessons on Sound, Cinema, and Mortality from Herzog's *Grizzly Man*," *Film Criticism* vol. 32, no. 3 (Spring 2008), 80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24777395>.

helps subsume notorious violent crimes into our popular culture. *Beware the Slenderman* ends with “fan art” of the two suspects alongside Slenderman, demonstrating how some people have subsumed this tragic incident and these two real adolescents into the Slenderman mythos. Indeed, true crime often performs a similar task, turning violent criminals like Charles Manson and Ted Bundy into morbid cultural icons whose grizzly stories are regularly offered up for public consumption. In the of case true crime documentaries, music often plays a subtle but significant role in creating and transmitting these stories. As I hope this paper has demonstrated, the close examination of these musical choices can help us understand how violent crimes become embedded in popular culture.

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