Introduction

The Blair Witch Controversies

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There is actually very little else to say about this movie. Hence I predict that most reviews will be short. Like this one.

Peter Brunette, "Not Much There," *Film.com*

The Nothing That Is

In his on-line review of *The Blair Witch Project,* directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez III and released by Artisan Entertainment in America in July 1999, film scholar and critic Peter Brunette expresses his early predictions[1] for future discussion of this actually hotly debated film. After noting its "stratospheric" hype, Brunette disputes the celebration of the film's "nothing," the commonly made claim that offscreen space provides fertile ground for the imaginative production of fear: "There is also the theory that what you can't see is more frightening than what you can (because your imagination supplies the rest), but there is nothing here with the mythic power and depth of Freddy Kruger, say, that will enter the American subconscious." "Visually and aurally," he continues, "it's an awful film," and he proposes that if it "makes money . . . it will be one more item in the long litany that proves that success can be bought and that critics are so desperate for something different that they'll root for anything even slightly offbeat." Brunette concludes with the quotation that heads this introduction.

We open with Brunette's comments for several reasons. *The Blair Witch Project* (*BWP*) raises profound questions about film criticism, viewer response, horror, hoax, intertextuality, and the mock-documentary. Brunette's own remarks invite a host of new speculations about *BWP:* the comments about "stratospheric hype" and "desperate" critics invite us to reconsider the marketing, production, and consumption not merely of this film but of

cinema in general. The appraisal of the film's techniques and its video-camera aesthetic invites us to speculate on theories of film pleasure. The dismissal of the unseen and the power of what lies offscreen prompts us to reexamine the nature of cinematic representation and its production of affect. Finally, however, the conclusion—not only that there is *nothing* in the film that will affect the American subconscious but that there is *little else* to say about it—is premature. It is clear (and this may be the only thing clear about *BWP*) that critics subsequently have had a great deal to say about the movie and that its buzz factor and the sheer number of spoofs made of it demonstrate a profound impact on the American subconscious—as well as consciousness.[2]

A critical book addressing *The Blair Witch Project* is especially warranted given the controversies this film has inspired. Part of what intrigues about *BWP* is the simple fact that no one can quite agree on almost anything having to do with it except its astounding profit. It is a movie, say David Ansen and Corie Brown in *Newsweek,* that was "shot with a handheld video camera in which nothing is shown and nothing happens that anybody can really describe." The operant word, as we have noted, is "nothing." From Adina Hoffman's "The Creation of Something from Nothing" to Brunette's "there is nothing here" to James Keller's "'Nothing That Is Not There and the Nothing That Is' " (from Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man," a poem that raises chilling questions about wilderness and consciousness), critics, viewers, and reviewers have debated how a cheaply shot film and Internet site could so successfully conjure up ectoplasmic "proof" of missing persons and alleged witcheries as to become a major widescreen movie and box-office hit. The recent publication of *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality,* by Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, indicates that the art of mockumentary and film hoax is fast becoming a central area of inquiry, especially as it emerges from "a culture in which the association between factual discourse and factual means of representation is increasingly tenuous" (Roscoe and Hight 3). Also tenuous are attempts to put *BWP* in a secure generic niche.

Aside from the initial confusion about its truth claims, disagreement about *BWP* ranges from subjective arenas traditionally open to interpretative dispute, such as textual ambiguity and assessments of value and impact, to aspects of filmic production that typically do not allow for debate, such as cost and marketing strategies. *BWP* has emerged as the site of several important crit-

ical controversies that we will discuss in terms of production and market, quality and affect, and originality and genre. Ambiguities surrounding the film include whether it is a true cinematic achievement or the product of luck, "hype," and the Internet; whether it is pleasurably frightening or boring and nauseating; whether a menace that is consistently offscreen and out of earshot scares us or frustrates us; whether it is boldly original or blandly derivative; whether it is poorly made or clever in its manipulation and violation of Hollywood production conventions; whether it is an independent art film or one that gives in, ultimately, to blockbuster aesthetics and strategies; whether it is a faux documentary or the faux ruins of a documentary; and finally, given that *BWP* barely develops the primary features of the back-story, explored by its paratexts, whether it is a film that can stand on its own as a complete narrative.

Before we turn to these specific critical controversies, we note that regardless of its ambiguities the film was unambiguously a box-office triumph. As Joseph Walker observes in his contribution to this volume, 1999 was projected by Hollywood to be the "Year of the Jedi," but it became the "Season of the Witch," demonstrating that *BWP* somehow tapped into the cultural zeitgeist of twentieth-century fin de siècle America. Its sheer profitability (the film was number two at the box office when released, was featured on August 1999 covers of both *Time* and *Newsweek*, and has earned over $240 million) introduces additional questions about the expectations of the American viewing public, not to mention what its success tells us about American desires and fears, and the place and role of cinema—and the Internet—at the threshold of a new millennium.

Out of Nothing at All:
Production, Marketing, and Intertext

The opening titles of the film describe a disappearance: "In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found." The protagonists vanish, and the footage stands in as a replacement for their supposed absence, an incomplete and garbled witness to their vanishing, and an incoherent document of an unseen menace. An early confusion over the making of *BWP* centered on one important detail: its makers promoted it as real footage. Like the ghost photographs

so popular at the turn of the twentieth century, it pretends to capture evidence of a paranormal event.[3] Like the 1938 radio production of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds,* it depicts a fantastic situation as though it were fact. This matter of its fakeness, then, becomes essential to questions about viewer pleasure: whether it matters that it is a fake in order for one to enjoy it. When it was revealed that the filmmakers were actors who had not disappeared at all, some viewers felt cheated and the worth of the film for them was diminished, just as the issues of its truth claims fascinated other viewers and critics.

All cinematic productions—even those that make claims to verity such as documentary or scientific films—are "diminishments" and "vanishings" in that they show us the shadows of objects and people gone elsewhere. Karen Beckman notes that well after the "vanishing lady" trick had lost popularity on stage, film resurrected it.[4] The cinema, a new art form at the end of the nineteenth century, could produce more "magical" illusions, more ingenious vanishings and reappearances, than the stage. Even a hundred years later, there is something of this magical chicanery to *BWP:* it tempts us on its Web site with realistic documents. It piques our curiosity and sympathy about the disappearance of a woman whose real name is Heather Donahue. It shows her terrified face, her tears, her sobbed apologies to her mother. We hear ominous offscreen noises. However, like a magician's trick, these seeming verities are whisked away: the film doesn't resolve the mysteries it raises. The opening title promises reality, and the credits discredit it. The Blair Witch is never seen; their "project" is never finished; their footage documents nothing more than themselves and their own filming. The production of *BWP,* like a stage act, seems to conjure fame, wealth, and rumor out of nothing at all and makes live actors seem to disappear.

No fiction, however, comes out of nothing: filmed in the forested areas near Burkittsville, Maryland, in 1997 under almost legendary conditions, *BWP* grew from the seedling of an idea that was ubiquitous enough for Stefan Avalos and Lance Weiler to produce a very similar one in *The Last Broadcast* (1998), touted as a "copycat" film even though it was made a year earlier.[5] The general notion of filmmakers disappearing in the woods seemed to be in the air, as it were, when Myrick and Sanchez, film students at the University of Central Florida, conceived the story of the Blair Witch in 1996. First produced by Haxan Films, it debuted as a midnight movie at the Sundance Film Festival in early 1999. It sub-

sequently won the Prix de Jeunesse at the Cannes International Film Festival in May 1999 and, having been acquired by Artisan Entertainment, was released into general distribution in the United States on 16 July 1999.

Almost all of the early controversies over the film centered on its hype, especially its innovative use of the Internet in marketing not only the film but also the conceit behind it—namely, that the legend was historical. In producing that conceit, the directors first put the fictional back-story together: "Blair" was said to be a town in eighteenth-century Maryland haunted by the ghost of Elly Kedward, a woman supposedly accused not only of witchcraft but child murder, whose evil returned to the town (supposedly relocated and renamed Burkittsville) every sixty years. In 1941, Rustin Parr, supposedly possessed by her, was tried and hanged for killing children in a house in the woods. In the fall of 1994, Heather Donahue, Joshua Leonard, and Michael Williams, supposedly film students at Montgomery College, trekked into the same woodland area with a 16 mm motion picture camera, a DAT, and a color camcorder in hopes of making a documentary on the Blair Witch. Their footage, said to have been unearthed a year later, provided the material for *The Blair Witch Project.* A sheriff, Ronald Cravens (suspiciously reminiscent of film director Wes Craven), was invented, along with statements made by him. False authorities were consulted about the Blair legend. False "Missing" posters were distributed, and pictures of the students were aired on actual local channels, along with interviews by bereaved parents and friends. These "documents" were put on a deliciously spooky Web site, with the now famous stick figure of a hanged man as its primary logo, and later into the book "compiled" by D. A. Stern, *The Blair Witch Project: A Dossier.*[6] The quality and ingenuity of these inventions should not be underrated. Someone had to write Heather's diary and age it for inclusion in *A Dossier.* Someone else had to furnish the woodcuts of the fictional Elly Kedward, the old photographs, the tedious police reports, the letters from Heather's mother. These invented artifacts are a tour de force of what Sally Morgan calls, in her study of the film, a faked "public history" where authorship is "studiously avoided or denied" (143). So when *Curse of the Blair Witch* was aired on the Sci Fi Channel two days before the film opened (it was the slick, "finished" documentary the likes of which Heather et al. were presumably in the process of making), the stage was set, with all its paraphernalia of documentability, for the release of *The Blair Witch Project.*

This relationship of the wide-screen film to its back-story opens up yet another area of controversy: just how important was perusal of the Web site and the Sci Fi Channel mockumentary to an appreciation of the film after it was understood that the whole thing was invented? J. P. Telotte, whose article we have reprinted from *Film Quarterly,* recognizes that the movie is ancillary to the Web site and that the "project" of the film is the telling of the story's background, to which the wide-screen production is yet one more "artifact." His study follows up on some of the explanations of its makers: "We've all had Web sites for all our movies for years," says a studio marketing head, "but this was a Web site that was an entertainment experience in itself. The movie was an extension of the Web site, not the other way around. That's what was new" (qtd. by Ansen and Brown). Likewise, much of the praise and blame given to *BWP* revolves around this issue of its intertextuality where two positions emerge. First, the movie was inferior because it did not develop the witch story the way the Web site and the Sci Fi Channel mockumentary did, nor did it provide adequate closure. And without prior sympathy for the characters one was merely irritated by them and their stupidities, and distracted by the shaky camera work and grainy quality of the film. Or, second, the movie was riveting because one came to it without prior expectations; its open-endedness was terrifying, the fear and desperation expressed by the actors was completely convincing, and the menace was all that much more powerful because it was unknown.

Another strange area of confusion was how much *BWP* originally cost to produce. It was agreed that it was comparatively low (Brunette's guess is the price of "a fully-loaded Taurus"), but reported figures in early reviews varied widely: $25,000 (Elias 13), $30,000 (Stodder), $35,000 (Maiese), $60,000 (Box Office Mojo), $100,000 (editorial, *Entertainment Weekly* 30 July 1999: 34), and a final production budget of $350,000 (Longino). This uncertainty, stretching over six months, is curious. Perhaps the higher figures take the making of the Web site into consideration. It seems odd, though, that information about budget expense should become such a matter of rumor, but this equivocation marks a central quality of *BWP*—not merely the astonishment that a low-budget film could gross in the millions but also the mysteriousness of its making. Concern over profit seems a particularly American obsession. When it comes to a percentage between initial cost and final box-office earnings, *BWP*'s success produced gasps in the film world. In essence, *The Blair Witch Project* is a kind of rags-to-

riches, "Cinderella" story. Keller writes that it confirms "the validity of the American Dream: two unknown filmmakers spend a small amount of money and generate fabulous wealth, and a small production and distribution company, Artisan, transforms a potential cinematic disaster into an extraordinary success."

The reasons for this success have been hotly debated, and the film was lauded for pulling a fast one on one of the richest and most exclusive industries in America. It proved, it seemed, that private filmmakers and no-name actors could reach and scare a vast viewing public without the expensive price tag of Wes Craven–style special effects, monster technology, and Hollywood advertising. "For studio executives," writes Kenneth Turan, "the scariest thing about 'Blair Witch' is not what's on the screen, which is mildly spooky at best, but the extent to which consumers have embraced it. For the success of this film is the most tangible evidence yet that for a sizable portion of the movie audience what Hollywood does best is not only not working, it may even be counterproductive."[7] "This, naturally, makes an already jittery town unusually nervous," write Ansen and Brown, who predicted that "film festivals and indie distribution companies will be flooded by home movies masquerading as features." Other critics were more skeptical that Hollywood would be rocked by the success of *BWP:* "It's like taking away the need for a driver's license and giving people with cameras free rein to do what they want to do," says Marcus Hu (qtd. by Ansen and Brown). For one thing, critics noted, much of *BWP*'s success seemed to lie in its innovative marketing strategy—an elaborate series of Web sites that promoted and sustained either a clever hoax or a compelling horror story, or both.

All these innovations, while they reveal what is original about *BWP,* open up new areas of controversy. Although *BWP* might be the first truly intertextual film, the continuous production of ancillary texts, no matter how ingenious, draws it away from the world of the independent film and into the realm of Hollywood commerce. The publication of Stern's *A Dossier* is a recognizable commercial gimmick, with the added feature of Heather's recovered diary. Further publication, however, of *Blair Witch: The Secret Confession of Rustin Parr* by the same putative author, along with a comic book version (Van Meter), makes it look as though Artisan is greedy to clean up on *BWP.* Add to that the video of the film, the video of *Curse of the Blair Witch,* the "additional footage" (marketed as a short video), the marketed T-shirts and stickmen figures, along with an inferior sequel in 2000

(*Blair Witch 2: Book of Shadows,* directed by Joe Berlinger), and *BWP* stops looking like an art film and an independent production and more like something completely co-opted by the Hollywood conventions it was originally praised for eschewing. Castonguay writes that "different critical responses" to the film "chart *BWP*'s cultural trajectory from art house cinema to successful indie blockbuster (or from legitimate art to lowly commerce)." He further remarks, however, that *BWP* "became a site of critical and cultural contestation concerning, among other things, the aesthetic hierarchies, generic boundaries, and dominant methods of film production and distribution in the 1990s." It is to that controversial critical reception that we turn next.

Quality and Affect: The Value of Nothing

The critical controversies concerning production and marketing of *BWP* feed into and have an impact upon qualitative appraisals of the film; there is no critical consensus as to whether or not *The Blair Witch Project* is a "good" or "bad" film. Peter Brunette, as we have seen, dismisses it as basically a scam, a trick that succeeds only because audiences are tired of Hollywood's formulaic big-budget productions. Michael Atkinson concludes on the other hand that the film is "both a visceral masterpiece and a formal reevaluation of what it means to 'see' a movie." Karen Zautyk, adopting the voice of the Blair Witch herself in "Blah Witch Project," adduces the popularity of the film to "the audience's high gullibility and low IQs," while Colin Covert praises the picture in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* as "a landmark horror film that leaves raw, painful slashes in the memory."

While critical evaluation of cinematic quality is a notoriously subjective category, critical appraisals of *BWP* tend to turn along two axes: the value of the "nothing" portrayed by the film and the artistry (or lack thereof) of the film's production. *BWP*'s nothing is either a source of celebration or a fatal flaw. For some critics, the film's circumspection—its camera seems to capture everything except the source of the menace—engages the viewer's imagination and provokes an affective response. Atkinson asserts that "*Blair Witch* lends disorienting power to off-screen space, which, being infinite and aurally unpredictable, is immensely larger and scarier than the space we do see. If movies are the dynamics between the viewer and the visible, here is a film that blinds us, implies the imaginable, and sets us running in the

dark." Richard Corliss notes the film's "bold sense of withholding" (62) in his *Time* article on *BWP* and quotes director Sanchez as saying, "horror is something that works in the viewer's mind, not really onscreen" (63). Hoffman concludes that *BWP* succeeds in being "genuinely disturbing" precisely because "less is more."

The "less is more" position correlates cinematic enjoyment with the masochistic engagement of the viewer's imagination. Atkinson is explicit on this point, writing, "That we can understand, even discount something in a film once we see it is a given: it's what we don't completely see, and cannot assimilate and dismiss, that yanks the safely solid ground of spectatorship from under our feet." Vision here is correlated with control, safety lies in seeing, and the underlying assumption is that an effective horror film—a "good" horror movie—is precisely one that traps the viewer in the claustrophobic space of his or her own mind, forcing the viewer to participate in the construction of horror through a process of visualization, of filling in the nothing rendered onscreen. Corliss therefore maintains that *BWP* is "scary even when nothing happens. . . . Anticipation is all. Anxiety is a more powerful emotion than shock" (62). Peter Travers echoes this in his *Rolling Stone* review when he proposes, "It's what you don't see in *The Blair Witch Project* that pumps your adrenaline and, in the best Hitchcock tradition, keeps you hanging on" (79), and J. Hoberman concludes in the *Village Voice* that *BWP* is "an absolutely restrained and truly frightening movie."

However, from the opposite perspective, less is not more: the nothing of *The Blair Witch Project* is not a productive surplus but rather a lack that diminishes enjoyment of the film. As Malcolm Johnson succinctly puts it in his "Scary 'Blair Witch Project' Is Haunted by Contrivance," "less is not always more." This is the position of Brunette and Zautyk among others who seem to resent the manipulation of the viewer that *BWP* performs and who feel let down by a movie that refuses to be confined to its cinematic borders. Implicit here is an alternative model of spectatorship that, rather than deriving enjoyment from surrendering control, instead correlates enjoyment with visual mastery. A movie that hints rather than tells, that titillates without payoff, fails to meet viewer expectations and leaves one unfulfilled.

The other main axis around which critical evaluation of *The Blair Witch Project* turns is the topic of artistry. Virtually all critical appraisals of *BWP* are forced to grapple with the film's unconventional production techniques—with what Justine Elias of the

New York Times refers to as "all the earmarks of hasty, inexperienced and enthusiastic filmmaking: occasionally shaky camera work, harsh lighting, and off-screen noise and laughter during important shots" (13). There is little dispute about the fact that the film "looks like it was shot by an eight-year-old for Scariest Home Videos" (Brunette). Indeed, stories of nausea induced by the jerkiness of the camera work are now part of the mythology of the film. Corliss notes that "During this film, almost nobody leaves. Except to be sick" (60). The question, however, is whether this is a bad or a good thing. There are three categories of response to this question: first, there are critics who contend that the film's techniques alienate and nauseate in ways that diminish pleasure; second, there are defenders of Myrick and Sanchez's low-budget aesthetic who, despite finding the film unpleasurable to watch, celebrate its production values as savvy, counter-hegemonic manipulation of cinematic conventions; and third, there are critics who, whether or not they appreciate the film as a slap in the face to Hollywood, derive enjoyment precisely from their affective response to the film.

Detractors find little to admire in the filmmaking. From a perspective that associates polished production values with cinematic quality, assumes that disorientation and motion sickness are incompatible with cinematic enjoyment, and takes it for granted that *BWP* is attempting to elicit a pleasurable affective response, *BWP* can only be condemned as a bad film. Critics who fall into this category tend to assume, like Jeff Stark (who characterizes the "feel" of the movie as "a poorly lighted fake snuff flick bootlegged on a third-generation videotape"), that *BWP* is trying to attain an art-house movie aesthetic but falls short. Stark comments that the film is "essentially a fake documentary about a fake documentary, but it's too self-consciously a parody." Johnson echoes these conclusions when he proposes that "in its self-consciously clumsy camera and sound work, together with the jarring shifts from color to black and white . . . 'Blair Witch' feels calculated rather than organic." Thus the production values of the film lack intrinsic merit, are overly self-conscious, and fall short of social commentary; the movie fails to be a big-budget film, an art-house film, or a late-night B movie.

The more common position among critics is a response that dissociates affective response from intellectual appreciation. This position is exemplified by Michael Blowen, who proposes that "the charming artistry of this movie isn't really the film itself but the anti-mainstream tale of its birth and life." Hoffman agrees

with this perspective and writes, "While *The Blair Witch Project* is not, by any normal standards, a 'good' movie, it is certainly an ingenious stunt—a work whose power derives from a skillfully feigned sort of artlessness." Travers is even more succinct when he refers to *BWP* as "a devilishly clever scam" (79). These critics appear to appreciate the anti-Hollywood idea of *BWP* more than its actual realization.

Finally, there are those critics who specifically relate the film's low-budget aesthetic to its production of pleasurable affect. For Atkinson, "The absence of FX or even postdubbing isn't a lo-tech stance taken by Myrick and Sanchez—it's what makes the movie utterly convincing, and therefore boil with dread." And this sense of dread produced by the film is in itself—or leads to—a form of enjoyment: "Myrick and Sanchez have given the concept of 'catharsis' a whole new lease of life, evoking better than any movie has before the reawakened sense of being 10 and shaken rigid by a bogeyman story." From this perspective, appreciation of the film does not disengage affect from intellect or hinge upon the film's success at eliciting displeasure; rather, the low-budget production techniques succeed at eliciting terror or dread, and there is something intrinsically pleasurable in the cinematic evocation of these sensations.

One must also consider Leland, Brown, Gordon, and Angell's observation in *Newsweek* that the alleged nausea induced by the film is skewed generationally. "Though the jumpy style has alienated older viewers," they observe, "it taps a generational linguistic trope, one more fundamental than the latest slang." They continue, "To a Gen-X and -Y audience raised on handheld TV programs like *Cops* and MTV's *The Real World*, deliberately low-fi recordings by groups like Pavement or the Wu-Tang Clan, and the funky misspellings of Internet newsgroups, grainy equals real, immediate. Wholly created by the production process, the jerk of a video camera or the crackle of a scratchy vinyl record has come to stand in for the truer reality behind the process." This comment importantly foregrounds learned conventions of spectatorship that influence both affective and cognitive responses.

That "Gen-X and -Y" spectators of *BWP* would be more resistant to the nausea afflicting "older viewers" because of the former's familiarity with the conventions of "reality TV" indicates that spectatorial expectations and responses are conditioned through repetition. Some viewers, then, are better equipped than others to decode and interpret the patterns of cinematic representation

deployed by the film. Nausea or the lack of it felt by an audience can indicate as much about the viewer's familiarity with contemporary paradigms of representation as it does about his or her intestinal fortitude. One could postulate that part of *BWP*'s appeal to youth culture is that it allows a specific and rebellious population to demonstrate its mastery of a learned viewing technique.

Even more provocative in Leland and company's observation, however, is the correlation between low-budget video-camera aesthetics and realism: "grainy equals real, immediate." This connection is repeatedly cited in reviewer responses to the film and examined critically in several of our contributors' essays (Banash, Castonguay, Higley, Keller, and Walker). Covert proposes that Sanchez and Myrick "strip away all the slick effects that distance us from mainstream monster movies" and that the result is a "stomach-churning example of horror verité," and Edward Guthman comments that "the film has the grainy, handheld look of a home movie. Funkiness of this sort works here because it heightens realism." Atkinson even goes so far as to propose that "some Sundance audience members didn't know the film was fiction, and it's hard not to envy them."

This equation of camcorder aesthetic and realism demonstrates the power of learned conventions of spectatorship to influence affective and cognitive response. *BWP*'s success in provoking fright—and therefore pleasure or unpleasure—in the viewer is repeatedly correlated with perceptions of the film's realism, which in turn is connected to the way in which the film was produced. What needs to be kept in mind, of course, is that the low-budget aesthetics of *BWP* are no more "real" than those of the Hollywood blockbuster, and its product no less edited than more expensively made films. The perception, however, that *BWP* is more realistic indicates the ways in which, through technological mediation, "realism" is governed by conventions of representation.

From Something: Originality, Derivation, and Genre

New and forgotten modes of representation lead us to a third area of controversy: the originality of *The Blair Witch Project*, its generic niche, the cinematic conventions from which it has seemingly broken away, and the new cinematic conventions of "realism" that it has mimicked. When the film was released, there was a tremendous sense that it was an original concept and a novel approach to horror. Formal and informal reviews repeatedly noted

how the film challenged the fatigued conventions of the contemporary Hollywood "scary movie."[8] "It gave the audience something entirely new," writes Dan Hsia, "something creative, daring, imaginative, and totally original. Suspension of disbelief was brought to a new level." Blowen writes of it: "Originality rules! . . . It's great to see a project that breaks all the rules win. . . . Perhaps the commercial success of this phenomenon will inspire others to cut through the old tired formulas as well." "Not only is it the first film in which actors themselves shot [it]," writes Marc Savlov, "it's also a harrowing, genuinely disturbing freakout of a horror show that eschews the rampant gore and clever irony of most modern fright-fests in favor of internalized terror." Jay Carr calls it "cheesy and primal," partially because it's so "minimalist," and because it "shrewdly substitutes dread for gore." Other reviewers were less convinced of its innovativeness: "'Blair Witch' isn't truly original so much as lightning that struck at the right time," writes Bruce Westbrook, "and [it] was backed by a wildly effective marketing campaign." Critics, as Brunette has declared, are "desperate for difference," and perhaps rightly so. Those who praised *BWP*'s originality might have been confining their comparisons to its recent competitors. What *BWP* borrowed and recombined from earlier films and forms needs some reiteration, then, in the matter of what it owes to older, cheaply shot independent horror films; direct cinema; the aforementioned "reality TV" and the home-video industry; and documentary and its subversive daughter, the "mockumentary."

As we have seen, *BWP* has been praised for breaking three of contemporary Hollywood's rules of horror: that the protagonists win, that the menace be revealed, and that expensive special effects and editing remove all traces of the amateur and the presence of the camera. Thirty years ago, the hero in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) dies, cynically enough, at the hands of his supposed rescuers, much to the shock and grief of the audience. A hysterical Sally is the sole survivor in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1976). Like *BWP*, both films were made independently on shoestring budgets with no-name actors; both achieved overnight success and cult status; and both have been praised for their "cheesy," "minimalist" film techniques that enhanced a sense of frightening reality for viewers. They terrified by their "seeming artlessness," writes Corliss, who also compares *BWP* to Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* (1982) and John McNaughton's *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986). These

films, however, contribute to the long-standing Hollywood convention of graphic violence. What, then, of the restraint exercised in the bold revision offered midcentury by Val Lewton? Hoberman writes that *BWP* is a "throwback—inexpensively produced and suffused with the subtle Lewtonian atmospherics of B movies like *Return* [*Curse*] *of the Cat People* [1944] and *I Walked With a Zombie* [1943]." Far before Atkinson's praise of *BWP*'s suggestiveness, Curtis Harrington observed in 1952 that "what takes place just off screen in the audience's imagination, the terror of waiting for the final revelation, not the seeing of it, is the most powerful dramatic stimulus toward tension and fright" (195). Describing Lewton's graphic circumspection, Telotte writes in *Dreams of Darkness* that "absence takes on substance, forming the cornerstone of his distinctive fantasy aesthetic" (22). Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963) provides another possible stylistic progenitor that incorporates suggestion, shadow, and suspense instead of graphic violence. The artistry of *The Haunting,* which is completely destroyed in its 1999 remake, is that we hear but never see the ghost. The *cinema-vomitif,* popular in Hollywood horror since *Night of the Living Dead,* invites us to look upon *BWP* as an original departure when it is a return in many ways to older, cannier methods of indie horror, but housed in a presumably new filmmaking method.

This matter of its original making, which Savlov declares to be "at least as interesting as the movie's actual story-line," invites further speculation about its progenitors. Rumors circulated that Donahue, Leonard, and Williams were deliberately kept hungry (one granola bar a day), fatigued, and terrified, which might be why Stark calls it a "fake snuff flick." The plan, according to Myrick and Sanchez, named "method filming" (after "method acting"), was that the actors were given a two-week crash course in how to manipulate handheld cameras. With no script, or even much idea of the story or their relationship to each other as characters, they were set loose on Burkittsville and the surrounding forested region for a week. Once in the woods, they were guided by GPS (Global Positioning System) handsets to messages that gave each of them their directions for the day along with their "motivations." "It was vague enough so that we could spring some surprises on them," said Sanchez (Savlov). Taking the place of the unseen Blair Witch, the directors would creep out at night to the actors' tent and spook them with noises, slime one of their backpacks, and leave them a gruesome bundle. The actors, then,

shared ambiguous status with the writers/directors, notes Keller, and essentially replaced a film crew. This method would appear to be an entirely new form of filmmaking. Hoberman, however, compares *BWP* to Patrick Sheane Duncan's *84C MoPic* (1989) which "used a similar first-person camera—held in that case by a combat newsreel photographer—to tell the tale of a lost patrol" in Vietnam. Like *BWP*, "the strategy was intriguing but problematic. The viewer spent too much time wondering why the cameraman never had to change the magazine or just how many rolls of film he was carrying," a criticism also made of *BWP*: its "reality" was questioned because even in the midst of their greatest peril, neither Heather nor Mike stops filming. *The Blair Witch Project* may not be the first movie to make the actors the filmmakers, but it is perhaps the first to make its fiction dependent on actors who generated a story as they were instructed darkly, and by degrees. The directors, still in control of the film, relinquished a certain amount of control to the actors, who then pretended to be filming in a completely "uncontrolled" situation.

The filming of people under crisis in "uncontrolled situations" is a stock feature of a genre called "direct cinema" (popularly known as cinema verité), a branch of documentary started by Jean Rouch's *Chronique d'un Eté* in France and developed by the Drew Associates in America (*Primary* [1960], *Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment* [1963], etc.). Stephen Mamber defines it as "a filming method employing hand-held cameras and live, synchronous sound" (1). Its essential element is that it is "uncontrolled," which means that "the filmmaker does not function as a 'director' nor, for that matter, as a screenwriter. . . . A prepared script, however skimpy, is not permissible, nor are verbal suggestions, gestures, or any form of direct communication from the filmmaker to his subject" (2). The filmmaker in direct cinema is an observer of real people in real situations, wherein this term "real," says Mamber, indicates not only an avoidance of actors but a refusal to place nonactors "into roles selected by the filmmaker, even to 'play' themselves" (3). It attempts "to strip away the accumulated conventions of traditional cinema in the hope of rediscovering a reality that eludes other forms of filmmaking and reporting," along with the traditional documentary film (4). "We wanted to shoot this thing," says Myrick in an interview with Andy Jones, "in such a way that when you see it on the screen, it looks totally genuine, like a real documentary. Like a real Home Movie" (qtd. by Roscoe 5).

The next question to emerge, then, is whether *BWP* is not actually a mock-documentary—as Myrick, Roger Ebert, Jane Roscoe, and a host of other reviewers and scholars identify it—but rather a mock direct cinema. What *BWP* fakes is not a documentary; it is the footage for a potential fake documentary that degenerates into fake cinema verité. For Sarah Vowell, *BWP* more strikingly resembles Eleanor Coppola's *Hearts of Darkness* (1991), about the making of *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and the weariness of actors and crew (tired of a director who won't stop filming), than it does a conventional documentary. Even this humorous comparison doesn't quite match, for *BWP* has no finished film to reference, unless we count the Web site and the Sci Fi mockumentary. *BWP*'s "reference" is self-reflexive; it films itself falling apart as a crafted piece of work and as something recognizable as art.

For Roscoe, this is its strength. In "*The Blair Witch Project:* Mock-Documentary Goes Mainstream," Roscoe outlines documentary aesthetic and philosophy in efforts to show how mockumentary in general and *BWP* in particular critiques them. Quoting Michael Renov and Brian Winston, she reiterates conventional documentary's concern for the "evidential" and the scientific.[9] Along with making a sham of these serious intentions, *BWP* also confuses registers and blends different film media. The private home-video style with the cheap color camcorder versus the public, "serious" takes with the expensive 16 mm camera reference "a whole range of extra-textual debate," says Roscoe, which pits documentary "elitism" against "video popularity," high art's expense against video's "economy," and especially highlights the clash, inherent in the whole *BWP* industry, between science and myth (6). While documentary seeks objective discovery and commentary, the gathering and showing of evidence, and the use of the camera as an instrument of witness, *BWP*'s story "defies rational and logical . . . explanation" (6). For Roscoe, putting it into the genre of mock-documentary engages it in a critique not only of documentary's truth claims but of the abuse of other factual film discourses like "Reality TV and the fly-on-the-wall docu-soap," which "have attracted criticism for being exploitative and sensational" (6). She sees in *BWP* a more "muted and implicit critique" of reality conventions than famous mockumentaries such as *Man Bites Dog* (1992—a parody of documentaries on serial killers), *David Holzman's Diary* (1967—a parody of direct cinema), or *Waiting for Guffman* (1996—a parody of the "making" of a stage production), whose ludic qualities reveal its

criticisms. Even so, the satiric nature of much mock-documentary does not quite fit the tenor of *The Blair Witch Project*, whose primary goal was to scare, whose paratexts and advertising were aimed at deception as well as inducing and extending an interest in the back-story, and for whom the Hollywood limelight helped wrest it from genres typically associated with anti-Hollywood parody. Roscoe's point that it is the first mock-documentary to go mainstream is well taken, but ironically its mainstream success perhaps obscures for many viewers the most crucial aspects of its importance—basically its resistance to classification and its ultimate subversiveness.

Conclusion: Lost in Millenary America

It may be mere coincidence that *BWP* is a fin de siècle film, produced as it was at the tail end of a millennium and in the final year of a century devoted to developing the art of cinematography. This film, however, presents us with liminalities that have inspired debates and ambivalences, and its primary trajectory is the literal threshold crossing that brings Heather and her companions from her familiar house in the city to the spectral house in the woods where she perishes.

The edge of the woods and the turn of a century share this sense of our being poised at a liminal crossing that reduces and ambiguates vision. We have trouble seeing past either very far. A new century, let alone a new millennium, is also a kind of threshold, a mental line of demarcation that merges the past and future as no other points in time do and that inspires an intense vision and revision of our achievements. Heather's famous statement, "It's very hard to get lost in America these days," bespeaks a number of anxieties that emerge in a film at the end of a millennium about the failed attempt of three filmmakers to record, escape, let alone see a mysterious threat in one of America's oldest and almost forgotten frontiers. It takes us back to a kind of Puritan dread, beautifully expressed by Christina Rieger in her letter to the editor of *Newsweek*, in which she compares *BWP* to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown": "the film-students are ill-prepared for the predatory and inexplicable nature of the evil that they willingly pursue by journeying into the woods." Sally Morgan's article on "heritage noire" remarks that "it is in these New World woods that the makers of *The Blair Witch Project* set their film—the godless, pagan woods of an irre-

deemably and perpetually foreign country" (147). She reflects on the ways in which *BWP* manipulates "public history," that is, a sense of history "that a community develops . . . through exposure to film, television, primary-school history lessons, popular literature and folklore," but it is a "heritage noire": instead of offering comfort, "the project produces unease, like a dark mirror" (140), especially in its focus on the Puritan wilderness, the "backwoods of the American Psyche" (147). Roscoe contributes as well to this sense of the subversive and threatening wilderness areas that are continually generated in domestic America by remarking that *BWP* "has successfully tapped into contemporary fascination with alien abductions, supernatural experiences, X-files-style paranoia and conspiracy theories" (7).

The imagery of the woods offers another message implicit in the film: the more one seeks information, the more one is left in the dark. The equation of social and technological progress with open horizons and clarity of vision is a conventional metaphor that the film undermines. To be "out of the woods" is to have solved the problem, to have a clear line of sight untrammeled by superstition and ignorance—to be, as Heather herself comments at the end of her diary, "no longer in danger" (Stern, *Dossier* 161). To be left "in the woods" is to be "in the dark" where the familiar and comforting constructs that provide human identity and intelligibility collapse. As is suggested in Wallace Stevens's poem, our epigraph to this volume, the enemy in this film is a barren, inhuman universe of anomie and nonrepresentation. It threatens to give its listeners "a mind of winter," to turn them and their devices of listening into snowmen (or stickmen)—wherein, nothing themselves, they behold "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." In a similar vein, David Banash, in his essay in this volume, traces the true horror of the film to the camera's failure to capture not only "reality" but a faithful record of human subjectivity:

> The raw materials of *BWP* are, no doubt, our fears of and insecurities with (mimetic) technologies that we can neither trust nor escape. And with its stark, bleak ending—the failure of a documentary project, the disappearance of human agents, and the inhuman survival of the tapes and film—*BWP* offers no consolation. But such fears are repressed and turned into a utopian affirmation of our contemporary moment through the valorization of our imagination (self) coupled with the indie myth of good-old American economic self-reliance. For audiences and reviewers, the film is thus coded as a return to utopian authenticity. Yet narratively, this moment is precisely what the film denies.

The true horror, then, of *BWP* is its bleak celebration of a spiritual nothingness which its ancillary texts and wild-goose chases end up confirming rather than denying.

All twelve contributions in this volume examine some aspect of the subversive "wilderness" that is *The Blair Witch Project* and its related texts. J. P. Telotte's "*The Blair Witch Project* Project: Film and the Internet" was one of the first critical essays to recognize the primacy of the Internet as the main event, the film being ancillary to it. This is why, he argues, conventional films have not had the wildly successful response to their own commercial Web sites as has *BWP*, whose Web campaign is essentially induplicable. Having reached a similar conclusion, James Keller writes in "'Nothing That Is Not There and the Nothing That Is': Language and the Blair Witch Phenomenon" that *BWP* and its paratexts may be the film industry's "first truly intertextual productions," a "clever effort on the part of directors and marketing experts to create a cultural phenomenon reminiscent of the structure of the Internet," and resulting in blurred distinctions not only between fiction and reality but between director and actor. James Castonguay's "The Political Economy of the Indie Blockbuster: Fandom, Intermediality, and *The Blair Witch Project*" examines the burgeoning American appetite for independent films, a taste that Hollywood capitalized on by playing up BWP's "resistant practices" while, ironically, involving it in the "political economy" of blockbuster power and conglomeration. In "'People Just Want to *See* Something': Art, Death, and Document in *Blair Witch, The Last Broadcast,* and *Paradise Lost,*" Sarah Higley looks at the resemblance between *BWP* and *The Last Broadcast,* examining these "copycat" films (and their seeming reliance upon Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky's *Paradise Lost*) in a discussion of documentary and mockumentary aims that focus on the death and disappearance of filmmakers, along with the enemy that they attempt (and fail) to record. Asked to direct the sequel (*Blair Witch 2*), Berlinger references some of the details of his documentary while mocking the reliability of video. David Banash's essay, "*The Blair Witch Project:* Technology, Repression, and the Evisceration of Mimesis," challenges the popular notion that *BWP* evokes a return of the viewer to the powers of the imagination and proposes instead that the true horrific realization of *BWP* lies in our final understanding that our technologies of representation do not adequately represent reality and

never will; while *BWP* may not exhibit the evisceration of Josh, it eviscerates mimesis itself.

In his "Transgressing the Safe Space: Generation X Horror in *The Blair Witch Project* and *Scream*," Andrew Schopp looks at the complex relationship between fear and pleasure in two films aimed at young adults—*BWP* and *Scream*—in order to challenge one of criticism's most persistent assumptions, the "safe space" fallacy. In exploring the false sense of security that deteriorates once one "loses control over the mediating device," he compares the way both films create film terror by incorporating and mocking horror conventions. Bryan Alexander extends this study of Generation X horror in "*The Blair Witch Project:* Expulsion from Adulthood and Versions of the American Gothic" by demonstrating how much the disturbing quality of the film owes to its infantilization of its young adult characters who are abjected, "cast out" of the world of adults and kept from making adult art or even a coherent narrative.

Turning to issues of gender, Joseph S. Walker writes in "Mom and the Blair Witch: Narrative, Form, and the Feminine" that while the film decentralizes authority and organization in ways that challenge conventional film hegemonies, its paratexts have not been kind to Heather. *The Blair Witch Project: A Dossier* (which contains an ersatz copy of Heather's diary) "replaces the intelligent willful young woman of the film with a foolish and silly girl far more typical of the horror genre as a whole," who is punished for leaving the domestic (feminine) world of her apartment and college to investigate the nondomestic (masculine) world of media and forest where it is the violent return of the father (not the witch) that destroys her. Both Joewon Yoon and Stephanie Moss compare *The Blair Witch Project* with late-nineteenth-century novels. In "Ghostly Imagination, History, and Femininity at Centuries' Ends: *The Turn of the Screw* and *The Blair Witch Project*," Yoon compares Henry James's famously ambiguous 1898 tale of madness and the supernatural with *BWP*, arguing that the two comprise a "ghostly pair" linked by their playful tampering with the distinction between reality and representation, textual ambiguity, and "the conspicuous presence of a shrieking woman." In "*Dracula* and *The Blair Witch Project:* The Problem with Scientific Empiricism," Moss takes her study in a new direction by using Bram Stoker's novel and *BWP* as points of departure for a historical examination of scientific methodology, and in particular the science of psychical research. The paranor-

mal has preoccupied scientists and popularists at the ends of both centuries. But for different reasons, both texts bespeak a fundamental suspicion of the powers of burgeoning new technologies to document or deal with it.

The last two essays examine how *BWP* utilizes American geography and the landscape of American imagination: Christopher Robé's "In Search of Burkittsville" examines not *BWP* itself but the effects of the film on its real-world setting, the town of Burkittsville, Maryland, in order to explore the reconstruction of this village and its fragile identity in the wake of a film that imposed all sorts of unwelcome histories upon it. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock proposes in "Lostness (Blair Witch)" that what marks *BWP* as a millennial phenomenon is its pervasive anxiety about losing one's way. He analyzes the film in terms of three escalating orders of lostness—geographic, temporal, and ontological—and concludes that what *BWP* documents is a loss of bearings connected to the liminal space of millennial transition.

Taken together, these essays explore from diverse perspectives the formal structures and cultural contexts of a particular event: the unexpected emergence of a cinematic blockbuster out of an independent film that made a mockery of the Hollywood industry and billed itself as "real" footage of a supernatural occurrence in the woods. It reached the right viewers at the right time, at the height of the postmodern era—an audience surfeited on commercial glitz and both suspicious of and fascinated by new forms of media manipulation. What it will mean for the future of independent film and horror remains to be seen in this millennium. Perhaps its message, one of many, is that getting out of the woods is not the point, that this century has even darker visions than the last one, and that all frontier crossings introduce us to more woods, more obstructions, and more doubts, but also to more artistic and heuristic strategies and more self-knowledge.

NOTES

1. We assume an "early" prediction by the context of Brunette's remarks about the current "hype" of the film. *Film.com* is sponsored by RealNetworks, whose Web site with reviews and trailers is designed primarily to sell RealNetworks products. Their film reviews, consequently, are undated and merely list the year the title was released. Throughout our volume, we adopt (because we have to) a policy of "no page numbers" for the documentation of Internet texts. We give the Web addresses in the Works Cited.

2. In the immortal words of the Earl of Shaftesbury, "if it is real, then it can be satirized." The spoofs made of *BWP* are legion, including "The Wicked Witch Project," which follows Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* on her peregrinations of Munchkinland, complete with Toto's secret diary (http://www.wickedwitchproject.com/default.htm); *The Scooby Doo Project,* which speaks for itself; and several entertaining advertisements on television that featured a youth's sweaty face and dripping nostrils as he apologized to his parents for this or that commercial item. Castonguay's contribution, as well as Walker's, is replete with references to *BWP* spoofs.

3. See Fred Gettings's *Ghosts in Photographs: The Extraordinary Story of Spirit Photography,* which explores the pictures, most of them frauds, taken of apparitions and "ectoplasms" in the mid-1800s to early 1900s. The more contemporary development of the use of double exposure to suggest ghostly presences in photography is examined by Giuseppe Cannilla, Paulo Jusu, and Stella Santacaterina in *Ghost Photography: The Illusion of the Visible.* Karen Beckman's work, mentioned below, also examines this film genre.

4. *The Vanishing Lady,* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. "As the vanishing lady disappears from the stage, she rises like a phoenix from the ashes, making an immediate and ghostly comeback in this newly emerging world of film" (62, chapter 2: "Insubstantial Media: Ectoplasm, Exposure, and the Still Birth of Film"). Beckman's chapter shows how the return of the "vanishing lady" plays an "essential role in the birth of film" at the same time that the decorporealization of the woman's body, a reproductive body, resonates ironically against the reproductiveness of film. The trope of the "vanishing lady" has interesting applications to the disappearance of Heather in *BWP,* especially as our contributors Joseph Walker and Bryan Alexander read her manipulation and infantilization that end in her fictive demise. Mothers are suppressed and replaced by punishing fathers (Walker), and the sexual possibilities of teen horror are shut down in *BWP* while an adult woman is reduced to a vanishing child (Alexander). See also Lucy Fischer, "The Lady Vanishes: Women, Magic, and the Movies."

5. Explored in Sarah Higley's contribution to this volume.

6. The BWP Web site at www.blairwitch.com was dismantled briefly in 2002. This decision may have been made because *Blair Witch 3: The Prequel,* to be directed by Myrick and Sanchez—and promised on the Internet Movie Database in 2002, then 2003—was put on the back burner when Artisan, according to Myrick, could not commit to it (Chau). When the sequel aired in 2000, the BWP Web site was modified from its original design to highlight *Blair Witch 2: Book of Shadows.* A timeline was provided that referred to events and imagery depicted on the original page. Curiously, even though the sequel dispelled the facticity of BWP, the newer Web site still promoted the characters in *Blair Witch 2* as real, providing further fake documents (Stephen Ryan Parker's "award" winning book *Beyond the Pale: The Extraordinary Life of Daniel Douglas Home* [a Victorian spiritualist], even a fake acceptance letter from executive editor Margaret Clark at Pocket Books

for *Blair Witch: Hysteria or History*). While Haxan was probably attempting to maintain the "documentary" nature of its original Web site, these details raise further questions about the blurry overlap of hoax and fiction.

7. The remake of *The Haunting* had the misfortune of following *BWP* in 1999 and confirming Turan's statement. *The Sixth Sense* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan), also a late-1999 "scary movie," was nominated, however, for best picture. The conventions of the average Hollywood horror blockbuster that Turan declares not to "be working" need some extra examination. There is a certain program to almost all Hollywood horror from the beginning: the hero usually prevails; someone or a lot of people die, usually gruesomely; viewers are treated to the "jolt" factor (the figure seen in the mirror, the face at the window); but ultimately the monster or psychopath is vividly seen, even if masked, and is vanquished (or partly vanquished to ensure sequels). There have been some stunning horror films that more or less follow this program, including *The Exorcist* (1973); *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986); and *The Terminator* (1984). *Psycho* (1960) departs from the formula in its revelation of the killer's identity and his survival. Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), which introduced a monster that kills its young victims only in their dreams, started the teen slasher genre of the 1980s. That and Craven's *Scream* (1996), however, spawned a number of inferior sequels and copycat films that beat the convention to a pulp, so to speak, generating a new set of "rules" that are often mocked in *The Internet Movie Database* comments: "if you have sex you die; if you drink you die; if you say 'I'll be right back' you die." The inefficacies of Jim Gillespie's *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) and Jamie Blanks's *Urban Legend* (1998) seem to provide the bad Hollywood horror from which *BWP* represents a refreshing departure for Turan and others.

8. See note 7 above.

9. Michael Renov: "[Documentary] is the domain of non-fiction that has most explicitly articulated the scientific yearning" (85). Brian Winston: "Beyond art, beyond drama, the documentary is evidential, scientific" (127).

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