

## Lostness (Blair Witch)

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In the middle of the Maryland woods stands a white house that may or may not have been burned to the ground in 1940. Tiny handprints of the disappeared mark the walls, and adults stand in corners like chastened children too downcast and dumbfounded to face their fears. People find the house only by becoming lost, but this house out of time, back in time, offers neither succor nor safety for those who find it—for those who discover it only by virtue of no longer looking for it. Rather, running through the woods, blindly, one has run out of time when one arrives at the lost house.

One is lost when one arrives.

### Lost in Space

*The Blair Witch Project* is a film all about getting lost. Indeed, I will argue in this essay that *BWP* emphasizes three communicating or escalating “orders” of lostness: geographical lostness and the frustrating uncanniness of circling, which play a role in establishing a sense of historico-temporal lostness, which, in turn, participates in the development of what I will refer to as ontological lostness. *BWP*, in a nutshell, is a film about being lost in space and time: it is a film about being lost in the woods, lost in American culture, lost in time, and lost in (and to) history. Ultimately, it is about the loss of history and reality as discrete categories distinguishable from myth and fantasy. It is this pervasive anxiety about lostness that, in my opinion, marks the film as a millennial phenomenon.

The most obvious aspect of lostness inherent in *BWP* is, of course, geographical lostness or lostness in space, and this sense

of lostness is connected to semiotic ambiguity or failures of reading. Almost from the first moment the characters enter the woods, their sense of situatedness in space is frustrated by their inability to interpret visual directional markers, their compass, and the topographical map to which they refer frequently. At one point, the character Josh playfully explains to the video camera while pointing upward, "We're going more or less this way." His pointing up in the air humorously reflects the childish perception of maps in which north becomes synonymous with up, but this gesture simultaneously indicates at this early point in the film that Josh doesn't quite know where he is, cannot himself interpret the map or compass, and has placed his faith in Heather's ability to juxtapose and reconcile the two texts before them: map and landscape. Josh and Mike ultimately depend upon Heather's ability to read the map, that is, to organize space and establish directionality by correlating geographic features with textual icons.

While the map does not allow for direct and simultaneous communication with "civilization," it does seem to provide a technological means for the characters to organize their experience of both space and time. In terms of space, maps in general can be said to allow for a communication between civilization and wilderness in which the latter is domesticated and rendered intelligible by the former.<sup>1</sup> Wilderness areas are given boundaries, and geographic features are identified and used by the map's reader to orient him- or herself in space. In terms of time, a map allows for goal-oriented behavior and the construction of a specific narrative of geographic progress over time. By looking at a map, a temporal timeline can be overlaid upon geographic directionality—one can chart where one has been, locate where one is, and forecast where one will be in a certain amount of time. In this way, a map organizes both space and time.<sup>2</sup>

For Heather and, to a certain degree, for Josh, the map functions as a crutch, almost as a type of fetish object that promises to reestablish their directional orientation if only they unambiguously can correlate its markings with their geographic position. To this extent, the map can be grouped with the other enigmatic but suggestive visual and aural icons and events of the film: the crudely rendered stick figures, sounds of snapping twigs, the slime on the canteen, the stacked rocks, the nasty contents of the handkerchief, children's handprints on the walls of the old house, the sounds of children's voices, a baby screaming, and screams that are presumed to be Josh's. Each of these examples is estab-

lished by the film as "pregnant" with meaning for both the characters within the film and for the viewer—if only the meaning of these objects or events could be determined, if only they could be correctly "read," the truth of the characters' situation and perhaps even of the so-called witch herself could be uncovered.<sup>3</sup>

However, the correlation of the map with these other examples of inscrutable but potentially signifying objects and occurrences acts in a radical way to undermine the apparent distinction between the scientific facticity of the map and the "voodoo shit" associated with the supernatural mythos of the witch. The suggestion here is not so much that a contemporary map is inadequate to track a myth (although this does seem to be the case) but, more radically, that the line between the map as objective, scientific fact and the myth as subjective, irrational fiction is rendered tenuous at best and does not hold up under scrutiny. By paralleling the map with the stick figure adopted by the film as its logo as ambiguous or unreadable texts, the film thereby connotes that arriving at the "truth" of either involves a process of interpretation. The map is as much a constructed narrative as the witch.<sup>4</sup>

What is clear from the film is that the characters place varying degrees of faith in the map itself and in the other characters' abilities to interpret the map in a meaningful manner. Heather has complete confidence in the map and, at least initially, in her own competency at reading it; Josh maintains an intrinsic faith in the map, even if he becomes increasingly skeptical as to Heather's and his own abilities to interpret it. It is Mike, however, who sees most clearly the true value of the map to the group: nothing. He claims to have thrown the map into the river because he deems it "worthless." In assessing this action, the viewer is allied with Heather and Josh in regarding the decision as irresponsible and as carrying with it grave implications. The revelation of the destruction of the map activates a requisite cultural faith in science and in logic—the assumption that the viewer as well as the characters cling to is that the map is potentially decipherable and therefore holds the promise of deliverance for Heather, Josh, and Mike. Because they are surrounded by the seeming irrationality of an undifferentiated geographic space (a Deleuzian "smooth" space) and subject to inscrutable events that trigger superstitious responses, the map is the fetishized locus of scientific fact and rational decision making.

Mike, however, is correct—the map is worthless to the trio. It will neither orient them in the wilderness nor help them return

to civilization. What seems like an irresponsible and dangerous act merely forces upon the characters the realization of what is already the case (and what the viewer already recognizes)—that they are lost. Mike is the only one of the characters who is able to recognize the “semiotic illiteracy” of the group; none of the characters is able to reach any satisfactory conclusions regarding any of the visual and aural cues with which they are presented.<sup>5</sup>

Even before the map disappears, it is clear that the communication between civilization and wilderness facilitated by the map has been interrupted by the characters’ inability to interpret the cues provided by the map. However, following the disappearance of the map, the “wildness” of the wilderness forcefully emerges for the characters, and their superstitious fears are activated. It is at this point that “lostness” emerges for them: they cannot orient themselves in space, and, as such, they cannot project themselves toward their destination. Lostness itself encompasses both a spatial and a temporal aspect: to be lost is to recognize that the unfamiliar place where one is is not the place where one is supposed to be—one is only lost when one is not content where one is, but cannot get to where one would prefer to be. Although there may be a certain anxiety intrinsic to not recognizing one’s surroundings, this anxiety is heightened considerably when goal-directed activity has been interrupted by spatial disorientation, and this anxiety is exacerbated even further when there are temporal limitations placed on that goal-directed activity. For Heather, Josh, and Mike in the film, the duration of their expedition is bounded initially by the necessity to return the filming equipment by a stipulated time and to conform to the projections given to parents and friends, and ultimately by the limitations of their provisions and their abilities to forage for food in the wilderness. In the absence of the map, both directionality and temporality are confused for the students. They come to possess a sense of lostness, and their inability to interpret natural directional markers leads to an “unhinging” in space and time that results in a pattern of circling.

It is with this directional repetition that the Freudian uncanniness of the film blossoms most fully. Despite the premise of the film—the “documenting” of the ghostly Blair Witch—virtually nothing in the film can be said with any certainty to be supernatural. There is nothing intrinsically otherworldly about stacked rocks, stick figures, nighttime noises, or even the violence at the end of the movie. However, that in the film which potentially is

most disruptive of rationalist frameworks derives from the characters' geographic mobility. Following the loss of the map, Heather, Josh, and Mike cross a particular stream. Yet, if we accept the characters' interpretation of their surroundings, they somehow impossibly circle back and revisit a log that they had crossed earlier in their wanderings. This must be considered the uncanniest moment in the film.

According to Freud in his now-famous essay "The 'Uncanny,'" the sensation of the uncanny is derived from a "recurrence of the same situations, things, and events. . . which recalls the sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams" (42). To help elaborate this thesis, Freud recounts his own experience of "walking through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy" which was strange to him and, although walking in different directions each time, three times ending up back in the same place. He concludes from his own experience of the uncanny that it is elicited by the "involuntary return to the same situation" (42), "As, for instance, when one is lost in a forest in high altitudes, caught, we will suppose, by the mountain mist, and when every endeavor to find the marked or familiar path ends again and again in a return to one and the same spot, recognizable by some particular landmark" (43). This "involuntary repetition" ultimately "forces upon us the idea of something fateful and unescapable where otherwise we would have spoken of 'chance' only" (43).

The parallels between Freud's description of uncanny experience and the situation of the characters in *BWP* are striking: Heather, Josh, and Mike—assuming that they do indeed return to the same spot in the river—are subject to involuntary repetition that does indeed force upon them (and the viewer) the sense that some sort of supernatural agency is at work. If one assumes that the characters have been moving in more or less a straight line and that they do arrive back at the same point, then one must accept a situation in which the familiar laws of nature have been violated. This suspicion of the violation of natural laws is also connected by Freud with the stimulation of the sensation of the uncanny. According to Freud, an uncanny feeling is elicited when "the old, animistic conception of the universe, which was characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings, and by the narcissistic overestimation of subjective mental processes (such as the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts, the magical practices based upon this belief . . . )" is confirmed (46). Heather, Josh, and Mike believe themselves to be walking in a

straight line. If this is the case, for them to loop back to the same place, especially with the aid of a compass, would involve magic.

Whether or not magic is involved, *BWP* as uncanny narrative reveals the connections between uncanniness and the anxiety of lostness. Freud, walking in Italy, thinks he knows where he is and where he wants to go, but something prevents him from getting there—something either coincidental or subconscious but which seems to intrude from without.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the characters in *BWP* are either subject to involuntary repetition that seems magical in character or they encounter an equally uncanny geographic doppelgänger which leads them to believe that they have made an impossible loop. This thwarting of goal-directed movement is experienced as both frustrating and frightening and their sense of being lost derives from their inability to orient themselves and reestablish a linear spatial and temporal trajectory.

Once Josh disappears, this sense of lostness is compounded by the introduction of an additional objective: to find Josh. Heather and Mike seek both to find Josh and to return to their point of origin. However, as Mike observes, "We can't even find the car, how the fuck are we going to find Josh?" In response to apparent screams by Josh, Mike shouts, "Josh, where are you? Tell me where you are!" Assuming Josh is the originator of the screams, one wonders what he could possibly answer to this question. At night, in the woods, how could he direct Mike and Heather to his current position? By this late point in the film, the sense of lostness is all-pervasive. Heather and Mike do not know where they are and have no basis upon which to reestablish directional orientation. Concerted goal-directed movement has resulted in apparent circularity. Reaching the car does not appear to be a realizable goal. And, to add to their difficulties, the screams they attribute to Josh appear to be moving in space.

Finally, Heather and Mike are reduced to arbitrary directionality based on popular culture references. Regarding *The Wizard of Oz*, Heather comments that "The Wicked Witch of the West was the bad one," to which Mike responds, "Then let's go east." As a basis for decision making, the reference to *The Wizard of Oz* signals Heather and Mike's recognition of their lostness and their resignation to their inability to interpret natural directional markers. The reference thereby indicates a collapse in their faith in their own abilities to reason their way out of difficulty. While the invocation of the Wicked Witch of the West implicitly associates the Blair Witch with a child's fantasy narrative, Heather

and Mike's recourse to a children's text to direct their real-world geographic movement signals the dissolution of the border between fantasy and reality. Not only is it no longer clear to Heather and Mike where they are going, but it is no longer clear what is reality and what is fantasy. Having transitioned progressively from basing their movements on a map, on a compass, and finally on a children's narrative, the two now are overwhelmed by a profound sense of lostness.

### Historico-Temporal Lostness—Witch Time

The geographic lostness of the characters participates in the development of a sense of being lost in time and the disruption of a conception of linear history that progresses in an orderly fashion from past to future by way of the present. In "getting back to nature," removed from the ubiquitous calendars, clocks, and creature comforts of urbanized existence, the characters abandon historical time characterized by linear progress and revert to a cyclical pattern of circadian rhythms characterized by daytime movement and nighttime stasis, the latter of which is accompanied by heightened anxiety. Movement without apparent progress and the suspicion of an impossible geographic loop create the impression that the linear progress of time has been interrupted and that the characters are somehow caught in a temporal circle as well as a geographic one. Time, in the sense of a steady progression of discrete events, has dissolved. What has replaced this concept of linear time is a disorienting sense of cyclical time and uncanny repetition, which is precisely the temporal modality of the witch.

In *Curse of the Blair Witch*, the mock-documentary that aired on the Sci Fi Channel two days before the film itself premiered in New York, the "Blair Witch myth" is explored. Jane Roscoe writes, "Using 'experts' (the Blair historian, professors of anthropology, and Folklaw [sic]) as well as 'authentic' looking documents from the time (diaries and letters) its objective is to build up an account to convince us that the Blair Witch exists" (4). In so doing, *Curse* develops a narrative defined by geographic lostness and the cyclical recurrence of haunting.

*Curse of the Blair Witch* traces the origins of the Blair Witch myth back to 1785, when a woman named Elly Kedward in Blair, Maryland, was accused by several children of the town of having "bled" them. Found guilty of this crime, she was banished from the town in midwinter and left blindfolded and tied to a tree.

Although her death from exposure was assumed, during the following year all of her accusers and half the town's children "vanished." *Curse* then details that the inhabitants fled the town, which remained abandoned for forty years, and prohibited even mention of Kedward's name.

Appropriately, the abandoned town is reported to have been rediscovered by accident: a "lost" railroad worker stumbled upon the site of the town, and in 1824 the town was reinhabited. A year later, forty years after Elly Kedward allegedly committed her crimes, a young child drowned in a shallow stream in front of twelve witnesses who attested to having observed a ghostly arm emerge from the water and grab the little girl. The death of the child was attributed to the Blair Witch.

The next manifestation of the witch, as documented by *Curse*, occurred in 1886 when a new batch of children disappeared. A search party sent out by the township also disappeared, and their bodies were subsequently discovered at a location dubbed Coffin Rock in a "severe state of decomposition," with enigmatic "symbols" carved on their bodies. The bodies then disappeared before they could be brought back to the town.

*Curse* details that there was another outbreak of child disappearance in Burkittsville in 1940—only this time, a child reappeared. On the basis of the child's testimony, the authorities arrested one Rustin Parr and charged him with the murders of seven children. Parr testified that he was only "doing what old lady ghost" instructed him to do. The house Parr occupied was burned to the ground. All this leads up to the disappearances of Heather, Josh, and Mike in 1994 as represented in *The Blair Witch Project*.

What this chronology of Blair Witch activity details is a cyclical pattern of repetition. The myth of the Blair Witch suggests not only the continuance of Elly Kedward's consciousness after her physical dissolution but also her periodic reemergence in roughly sixty-year intervals. Indeed, the myth proposes that the Blair Witch exists outside of historical time and returns periodically to initiate the repetition of a traumatic founding event. The unhinging of linear time that accompanies the lostness of the characters in the woods of *BWP* propels them into the circularity of mythic time—as they begin to circle in space, they become caught up in cyclical "witch time." And it is only when the characters literally "run out of time," somehow seemingly step outside historical time, that they accidentally stumble across what we as viewers presume to be the Blair Witch house—a house that



*Curse of the Blair Witch* reports was burned to the ground. It is at this point that the characters themselves disappear from the screen—and from the screen of history. Their bodies disappear. Only the filmed footage of their experience of lostness remains.

One should also briefly observe in this context the chronological regression that accompanies the characters' geographic and temporal lostness. As noted above, Mike's acknowledgment and resignation in the face of the uselessness of the map seems related to his infantilization at the end of the movie during which he occupies a basement corner and adopts the position of the children in the Blair Witch myth who are made to stand and look away so as not to view the violence taking place in the room. A regression to childhood is also evident in the invocation of *The Wizard of Oz* as a paradigm for decision making, and particularly in Heather's apology monologue, in which, while accepting responsibility for the tragic turn of events, she also is reduced to the state of a tearful, scared little girl who apologizes to her parents and to those of Josh and Mike.<sup>7</sup> It is at this moment, as Heather's flashlight-lit and moist face fills the screen in a warped parody of childish campfire and sleepover games, that the thematics of lostness becomes especially pronounced: lost in space and unseated in time, Heather ultimately mourns the loss of her ability to distinguish fantasy from reality: "I'm scared to close my eyes and I'm scared to open them."

### Ontological Lostness

Everything in the movie builds up to this moment of Heather's apology. Geographic lostness contributes to a sense of temporal lostness, and the two together participate in the development of a profound sense of ontological lostness—the sense not just of being lost in the world, but of the loss of the world altogether. Heather is scared both to close her eyes and to open them because her nightmares seem to have become reality—the line between fact and fiction has been transgressed to such an extent that what she visits in her imagination seems to occur, and what occurs for her and Mike can only be reconciled with the laws of the natural world by being characterized as fantasy. The dim glow of Heather's flashlight distorting her face appears as the only dike against an ocean of irrational darkness that surrounds her and which threatens to collapse the flimsy tent walls and envelop her completely.

The slipping away of the world leading up to this point has been gradual but persistent as the film progressively assaults the

opposition between fact and fiction. The project in which the students are engaged is to chronicle the history of a myth. Heather, Josh, and Mike set out to interview the inhabitants of the town of Burkittsville and to visit the spots featured in local lore in order to document the legend of the Blair Witch. The project combines ethnography with journalism in order to produce a metanarrative of sorts—a story about the “life” and development of another story. However, the generic rubrics “documentary” and “myth” would seem to contradict one another, as the one pertains to the substantiation of truths and the other to hearsay and fiction. As Roscoe observes, “the association between documentary and the discourses of science is a strong and established one. Documentary shares with science the objective of discovering truth and knowledge through objective collection and testing of evidence” (6). The students, as they set off into the woods at the start of the film, are confident that they can distinguish fact from fiction and truth from falsehood. They will produce the true story of what is presumed to be a fictional narrative.

However, as geographic and temporal lostness emerge for them, the ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy and between fact and fiction disintegrates—it is as though they have wandered into a foreign world that fails to abide by the rules of cause and effect. The world ceases to make sense to Heather, Mike, and Josh. As noted above, the realm of the Blair Witch is a world of cryptic symbols and inscrutable sounds that foster a sense of unreality for the characters. Heather has “no idea” what to make of the grove of hanging stick figures. Similarly, she questions frantically “What the fuck is that?” as something seems to beat on the outside of their tent. The slime on the canteen, the cries and voices in the night, the piles of rocks, and, most significantly, the suspicion of impossible circling all frustrate the characters’ attempts at interpretation and foster the sensation that they have wandered off the path of reality into a nightmare world in which the laws of reality have been twisted and broken.

This transgression of the ontological line between reality and fantasy is also foregrounded within the film by the prominence of the movie and video cameras. At first, as their conception of reality is shaken, the camera emerges as a site of an alternate and preferable reality for Heather and Josh:

Josh: “I see why you like this video camera so much.”

Heather: “You do?”

Josh: "It's not quite reality."

Mike: "Reality says we gotta move."

Josh: "No, it's totally like filtered reality, man. It's like you can pretend everything's not quite the way it is."

In this exchange, a contrast is drawn between the "reality" of the characters' situation ("reality says we gotta move") and the "filtered reality" of seeing the world through the lens of the video camera, which allows one to pretend that the narrative unfolding is one over which one exerts some control.

Josh again foregrounds the competing realities of "real" situation and cinematic approximation in his attack on Heather just prior to his disappearance. He lashes out at her, shouting, "There's no one here to help you. . . . That's your motivation." When Mike tries to interrupt, Josh forcefully explains, "She's still making movies. That's my point." Heather responds, "It's all I have left," at which point Josh erupts, "Are you going to write us a happy ending, Heather?" Josh's onslaught is prompted by his frustration at his perception that Heather is not "in touch" with reality, that she is entranced by the filtered reality of the camera. His assumption is that, by "hiding" behind the camera, Heather is refusing to admit the seriousness of their situation. He makes ironic use of the conventions of narrative—motivation and scripting—precisely to foreground as illusory the control that the cinematic framing of events seems to provide. "Are you going to write us a happy ending, Heather?" is intended to prompt Heather's recognition that she is no longer the author of the events that are transpiring but rather is passively caught up in them along with Josh and Mike.

However, Heather's response, "It's all I have left," is especially telling. The character most in control of the venture, at least initially, and manifesting the most confidence in the map, Heather has been brought to the edge of an immense realization: that she is no longer in control of anything. This is more than the naturalistic realization that the forces of nature outstrip humankind's capacity to determine its own fate. Rather, it is the Gothic realization that there are forces in the universe that defy rational explanation. She cannot be in control of the world because the world around her no longer makes sense to her; the camera is all that she has left because her world has slipped away from her. The cinematic version of reality is the only version of reality left to

cling to, and Heather's contention is realized horrifically at the end of the film when she surrenders the camera along with her life.

In *BWP*, any certainty as to what is real and what is fantasy dissolves in the face of inscrutable and apparently impossible events. The wilderness setting and geographic lostness that give way to apparent circling participate in an unhinging in time, and these factors, together with all the seemingly significant but hermeneutically resistant encounters the students have, result in an existential crisis for the characters in which the defiance of the world to interpretation and the suspicion of supernatural intervention literally threaten their sanity and lives. The viewer of *BWP* is also placed in a similar interpretive bind: nothing in the film ultimately confirms or refutes the possibility of magic. One does not know if the students have fallen victim to tragic but mundane foul play or if, on the contrary, they have been the target of preternatural malevolence. Mike's confusion in the face of what seem to be Josh's screams—"I don't know if it's really there, I don't know if it's really him"—resonates with the viewer's own interpretive quandary in which he or she tries to distinguish "fact" from "fiction" in order to assess the implications of the violent conclusion. In this, *BWP* is an excellent example of Tzvetan Toderov's category of the "pure uncanny"—it is a film that walks the line between possible and impossible without ever confirming one side or the other. And it is precisely this frustration of not knowing—not knowing where one is or where one is going, not knowing what is real and what is fantasy, not knowing how to "read" the world—that generates anxiety for the characters and suspense for the viewer. In the end, all is lost—except for the footage that preserves or documents an experience of lostness. "All I found," reports Ronald Cravens, the (fictional) Burkittsville sheriff in *Curse of the Blair Witch*, "were a few scary noises, but no concrete evidence." Nothing on the found footage will lead one to the students or to the "truth" of their experience. It is a record of loss.

### Lost (in) America

In what has become a famous sound bite from the film, Heather remarks, "It's very hard to get lost in America these days and it's even harder to stay lost." However, what the film makes clear is that it is in fact very easy to get lost in America because the uniformity of the privileged ideological conceptions of

American is belied by diverse and fragmented experiences of geography, race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background. Heather, Josh, and Mike are the products of East Coast middle-class white suburban neighborhoods. They approach their project with a sense of economic entitlement and cultural superiority, as well as extreme—perhaps even hubristic—confidence that rural America will yield its secrets to them. Much like ethnographers entering a “primitive” or “less cultured” society, Heather, Josh, and Mike interview the residents of Burkittsville ostensibly to gather information about the Blair Witch but also, to a certain extent, to reconfirm their own sense of cultural superiority. As suburban scientific investigators of a rural superstition, Heather, Josh, and Mike implicitly reify their own superior positions on the ladder of American culture. Using their cameras as icons of their cultural and artistic control of their media, they presume to capture and assess the beliefs of people they consider beneath them. Their arrogance is never so baldly revealed as when they dismiss Mary Brown, the one resident of Burkittsville who claims to have had firsthand experience with the witch from the outset.

However, filming as a strategy of control falters in the woods as the students become lost and their interpretive strategies for making sense of the world are thwarted. Their initial recourse to explaining the occurrence of unusual events again invokes socioeconomic stereotypes: they attribute the piles of stacked rocks and the sound of breaking sticks to “rednecks.” This possibility is threatening to the trio because their knowledge of rural residents seems derived entirely from popular culture representations including the movie *Deliverance* (a film that Josh, in fact, mentions). Their reason for dismissing “rednecks” as possible antagonists is just as stereotyped: encountering the grove of hanging stick figures, Mike states, “This is no redneck. No redneck is this creative.”

Heather, Josh, and Mike have stereotyped ideas of America derived from their experiences as white suburban youths and their exposure to popular culture. What *BWP* suggests, however, is that when one goes off “in search of America” with expectations structured by particular social conventions, one cannot *not* get lost. Heather, Josh, and Mike are unprepared for their experience, the movie suggests, because they think they know what they are going to find in Burkittsville and the woods before they ever set out. America, however, is revealed to be bigger, stranger, and more heterogeneous than the students expect. *BWP* can be said to present a parallel between experiencing America and running headlong

into the woods at night armed only with a flashlight: sooner or later, one is bound to stumble over something in the dark.

### Millennial Anxiety and Lostness

My argument here has been that *The Blair Witch Project* is all about loss and being lost. What happens in the film is that three students get lost in the woods and never return. Their bodies are never recovered. What is found is the footage they film while in the woods. However, the footage does not explain their disappearance. Rather, what it documents most viscerally is the fear that arises when the world ceases to make sense and the horror that accompanies the realization of lostness.

As a cultural phenomenon, *BWP* seems to mark millennial anxiety and to have tapped into a cultural zeitgeist characterized by uncertainty. The larger questions of the film are questions both of epistemology (What can we really be sure of, after all, and how do we know what we know?) and of ontology (What world is this, and are there other worlds?). *BWP* is characteristically postmodern in its distrust of metanarratives and its challenges to binarized thinking: the uniformity of any conception of "America" fragments in the face of divergent experiences of class and geography even as the lines between history and myth and fact and fiction dissolve. What *BWP* "documents" at its most basic level therefore is a loss of bearings that seems connected to the ending of one millennium and the beginning of the next. It raises the haunting possibilities not only that historical traumas such as child murders return, thereby unsettling linear definitions of history, but that what we assume to be true about the world and ourselves is merely delusional—that we don't know nearly as much as we think we do. *BWP*, as itself a millennial phenomenon defined by a thematics of lostness, asks a culture on the edge of transition if it knows where it is going and if it can be sure what it will find when it gets there.

### NOTES

1. For an evocative description of the way in which just the presence of civilization in the wilderness domesticates the wildness of the forest, consider Wallace Stevens's poem "A Jar in Tennessee."

2. Yi-Fu Tuan, in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, observes what he refers to as the "spatio-temporal structure" of intentional movement in general: "Intention creates a spatio-temporal structure of 'here

is now, 'there is then' " (129). Directed movement, according to Tuan, creates "historical time," time defined by the linear progression of specific events. Tuan contrasts historical time with "mythic time," time considered more broadly in terms of human origins and ends and the repetition of astronomical events such as the seasons and the phases of the moon (131).

3. *The Blair Witch Project's* paratext, *Curse of the Blair Witch* (to which I will refer in more detail below), establishes the witch as female. The program traces the witch mythos back to an eighteenth-century woman, Elly Kedward. In addition, within the context of *Curse*, the child murderer Rustin Parr testifies that he was just "doing what old lady ghost" had instructed. While this essay will not pursue the connections between femininity and the circularity of "witch time," the complex correlation of witch/female/superstition/irrationality (as Joewon Yoon points out in her contribution to this volume) clearly participates in the general history of Western masculine hegemony, as well as a more specific underlying misogynistic thread in *The Blair Witch Project* (see Joseph Walker's contribution). Roscoe also notes what she refers to as the "monstrous-feminine Blair Witch" (7).

4. Roscoe notes that, in general, the film brings "into collision the rational and the irrational, illustrating the limits of science and its inability to demystify the social world" (6).

5. Mike's recognition and acceptance of this seems connected to his infantile regression and passive response exemplified by his standing in the corner at the end of the film. Mike is the first (and arguably the only one) of the characters to resign himself to being lost.

6. As has often been noted, Freud's account of his walk through the Italian town leaves uninterrogated his own unconscious motivations. Freud notes, "I found myself in a quarter the character of which could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses" (42). That he should return three times to this "red light district" and suggest that the repetition was the result of chance manifests an almost willful naïveté.

7. For a more extensive examination of the infantilization of the characters, see Bryan Alexander's essay in this volume.

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