

## Spiritual Warfare: Postfeminism and the Cultural Politics of the *Blair Witch Craze*

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If a film's success is measured by the cultural hysteria it produces, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) was the most successful cult film in recent history. Almost lost in the media frenzy, however, was the film's announcement of a trend: the witch had returned to popular culture.

The frenzy recalled nothing quite so much as Orson Welles' 1938 Halloween Eve radio broadcast of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, said to have persuaded millions that Martians had invaded Grover's Mills, New Jersey. But that hysteria seems itself to have become mythic, as Jeffrey Sconce argues: incorporated into our current sense of crisis, it reminds us "of the repressed potential of panic and disorder that lies just behind the normalizing functions of media technology, a terror [. . .] at once terrifying and yet suggestively enticing" (2000: 110-118). Similarly, *Blair Witch* has become legend, a postmodern campfire tale of our bewitchment by historical amnesia, mass mediated schizophrenia, and pre-millennial Y2K anxieties. **[1]**

But to turn back to the *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast with a question: Why Martians? Sociologist Hadley Cantril (1940) famously concluded that the signifier "Martians" did, in a sense, provide a locus for the combined anxieties of the 1930s, particularly for a xenophobic fear of imminent invasion. Asking the same question of the Blair Witch, why, of all the bogies available, did the *witch* achieve such astonishing resonance in 1999? What might have been the reason for the resurgence of this surmounted belief, this embarrassing remnant of our cultural childhood? Hadn't the evil crone been Disneyfied into children's comedy or historicized into a matter of moldy bread, disgruntled neighbors, religious intolerance, and misogyny? Indeed, wasn't *this* witch-characterized by the Blair Witch "experience" as angry, cannibalistic, malevolent, and female-and the one that popular feminism and modern paganism have held responsible for three centuries of gynocide, more than a little "politically incorrect"? Might that incorrectness and the various tensions underlying it have fueled some of the response? My project examines the "spiritual warfare"-the cultural and gender politics within and surrounding *The Blair Witch Project*-with a focus on the volatile nature of the witch as a signifier.

### Which Witch?

The witch is no simple matter in a text that deconstructs itself, that turns itself into a witch hunt, asking us to find "her," using layers of documents and "experts" to multiply possibilities and gaps, creating fear through radical uncertainty, and inspiring terror of what we cannot see, much less identify. Lacking embodiment in the narrative of the film proper, the witch is figured forth in an inscrutable language of oddly placed clumps of rocks, slime, suspended stick figures, and disembodied voices. More accurately, as J. P. Telotte has argued, s/he is the representation or experience of our present postmodern condition of being lost, not in the woods of any natural universe, but in "the mediated contemporary world" (2001: 38).

It is interesting, then, that *The Blair Witch Project* has been most popularly celebrated for "naiveté" and a method approach to filmmaking, in which the real emotions of the actors, who were actually making the film, were exploited.**[2]** It is known equally, as Paul Wells notes, for "foreground[ing] the primal fears inherent in the narratives rather than the generic motifs that have traditionally

expressed them" and "recovering 'suggestion' and 'allusion' in the horror film" (2000: 108). In this denial of conventional horror images and in its radical openness, *The Blair Witch Project* has been celebrated as iconoclastic and even "progressive." This film student *Project* subverted the machinery of cinema itself, seeming to predict the dissolution of corporate Hollywood. Winning the 1999 Independent Spirit Award for Best Film under \$300,000, it was celebrated as having opened the way to independent work-to the extent that its success partly inspired *Premiere Magazine's* special October 1999 issue on "Vanguard Hollywood."

Attracted to this combination of reality effect, cult following, and media impact, most academic criticism has interrogated the film's textuality rather than its politics. James Keller and J. P. Telotte, for example, emphasize the way the film's promotional and back-story elements, through multiplication and variation, create the notion of authenticity (paradoxically) in mediation. As Telotte puts it, these make the film merely "one more artifact," and point "in various ways away from the film's privileged status as a product of the entertainment industry." Immersed in the intertextual/hypertextual experience that is *Blair Witch*, film becomes "an extension of the Internet" that replicates our larger experience of a mediated world (Telotte, 2001: 35).**[3]**

It is notable, then, that the witch, the *Project's* titular subject and most important signifier, *does not* materialize, either in the film's narrative, or in the variously shifting layers of the Web site, documentary pretext, *Dossier*, and other hypertexts. As Eric R. Mallin puts it, "the end brings no clarity at all, no truth-just a spastic camera frame, the ticking of film stuck in a loop, the sight of nothing in particular" (2001: 113). Indefinitely postponed and occluded, doubled and multiplied throughout the *mise en scene* while disembodied in the narrative proper, the titular witch dissolves, as Matt Hills suggests, into "a semiotic field against which the film's (non) events, absences and uncanny repetitions are played out."**[4]** James Keller aptly calls it "a postmodern witchcraze, a hysterical inquiry that has no object in fiction or reality, not even a fully developed film" (2000: 80). Yet throughout it all, "the witch" continues to surface and transcend, sustaining her role as signifier of chaos. As Joe Berlinger, director of the sequel, put it, "Everyone came away from the first *Blair Witch* movie thinking the witch was somehow responsible for what happened, even though there are plenty of other interpretations" (2000).

To feminists, therefore, the media frenzy meant something specific and alarming: the sudden, astonishing resonance of a misogynistic stereotype-at a time, moreover, when the witch had been reclaimed decisively in popular as well as academic culture, literature, and religion as a feminist icon. Analyzed in the context of recent representations of the witch, witchcraft, pagan and associated new age movements, and from right-wing Christian to left-wing feminist perspectives, *Blair Witch* is a richly disturbing text.

### **The Back-Story: The Blair Witch Curse**

The text consists of two principle "stories": (1) the contemporary story contained in the "footage" left from Heather Donohue's ill-fated film project and the film constructed from it, and (2) the back story, the history/mythology of the *Blair Witch* presented in the film and exhaustively extended in the official Web site, the video mock-documentary, the *Dossier*, and several preceding and succeeding layers of hype. The back-story, as represented in the mockumentary and the film, creates an effect of authenticity and objectivity through a few well-chosen and executed strokes. In *The Curse of the Blair Witch* mockumentary, Charles Moorehouse, a Hampshire College "Professor" admits that "By the end of the

revolutionary war, witchcraft was a thing of the past" except in isolated rural areas, mentioning the Bell Witch and the Blair Witch legends as notable exceptions.

There follows a history of early modern witchcraft via a series of woodcuts, expert testimonies, and film clips, including a clip from a reenactment of the Salem Witch Trials in which, one woman, then another, and another shrilly proclaim Elizabeth Sullivan a witch. In this reenactment, the text acknowledges now well-established evidence that while women were typically victims, the simplistic feminist view that "witch-hunting equals misogyny is embarrassed by the predominance of women witnesses against the accused" (Purkiss 1996: 92).<sup>[5]</sup> Suggesting a barely repressed, indeed recurring, North American heritage of witchcraft and hysteria, the "documentary" cuts to the subject of contemporary witchcraft, defined by Lucan Johnson, an androgynous looking Wiccan priest in a videotaped segment as "a new religion, reborn back in the 1940s" although deriving from pre-Christian European paganism, and "a scientific study of energy and materials [. . .] focusing energy on specific goals [. . .] neither intrinsically good or evil."

Through such contrapuntally threaded comments, the mock-documentary makes even more serious gestures toward objectivity. "Not just old women" were victims of the European witch hunts "responsible for the deaths of 200, 000 people," says Moorehouse: "Men, young girls, political targets-whoever was on the wrong side of the church or the local authorities." He stresses the church's culpability, "their consolidation of power, their elimination of competing belief systems. Protestants, midwives, herbalists" (*Curse* 1999; Stern 1999: 109).

After interviewing Sanchez and Myrick - who argued that the "curse" of the Blair Witch was really the "huge injustice of this woman who was killed" ("Interview" 1999) - Peg Aloï of WitchVox (The Witches' Voice) defended the film for its access to the collective unconscious which, she stressed, is neither intrinsically good nor evil:

[N]ature, for all its beauty, can be terrifying: its strength, its ruthlessness, its constant struggle for balance. Perhaps we, exploring what it is to be witches, tap into what others construct as the witch myth; they see the mean old hag in the woods, we see the healer who likes to live alone in nature. This archetype works on many levels and even 'Unky Carl' Jung allows that it is embedded in our collective unconscious, even as it permeates literature and visual media" (Aloï, "Be Afraid," 1999).

WitchVox scrutinized the Blair Witch texts intently, seeking correspondences to what they believed to be true, and officially proclaimed it as an "open" text that provoked healthy discussion. But the Witches' League for Public Awareness concluded, "while the movie doesn't *directly* vilify Witches," and while the mockumentary "precursor from the Sci-fi channel [. . .] is much less anti-Witch," the film "does rely heavily on the old 'scary evil Witch' stereotype for [. . .] content. [. . . and] infer[s] that evil Witchcraft is the cause of the troubled filmmakers [sic] woes" (A., Chad).

### **Witchcraft, Feminism, Postfeminism (Anti-Feminism?)**

What all the *Blair Witch* texts disallowed was the witch reinvented by feminism. Beginning in 1968 with the second-wave WITCH movement (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) led by Robin Morgan, and as traced by Morgan, Diane Purkiss and Kathryn Rountree, feminists have claimed solidarity and identity with the persecuted witches of the early modern period. At first a

purely political movement "that affirmed Marxist analysis and a hip Left style" (Purkiss 1996: 71) and employed the stereotype for its shock value and performative potential, WITCH had the effect of drawing feminist attention to the history of the witch-particularly the European witch craze and the Church's role.

The repercussions in turn stimulated interest in the Goddess and the possibility of a pre-Christian matriarchy. Mary Daly concluded in *Beyond God the Father* (1985) that feminism and Christianity would never be reconciled. The witch came to be seen as the priestess of a pre-Christian religion centered on the Goddess and eventually as her third aspect, the crone. Meanwhile, in the UK, Gerald Gardner's modern witchcraft or Wicca, had begun in the 1950s as a separate movement and included in its pantheon the horned god as the Goddess's consort.

The witch soon became central to the empowering myths fostered within second-wave feminist literature and criticism-for example, the female gothic tradition celebrated by Ellen Moers and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and represented in the then recent poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton (1979). In France, this was re-visioned in terms of Helene Cixous' unruly laughing Medusa and Cixous and Catherine Clement's hysteric/sorceress in *The Newly Born Woman* (1979). Since the 1970s, feminists have taken Medusa (the victim/monster whose phallic look would turn men to stone), sorceresses in general, and "bewitched" madwomen as heroines whose gazes and non-linear language transgress the symbolic order. Thus the female gaze has come to be associated with witchlike female monstrosity and female power simultaneously.

Psychoanalytic feminist critics such as Barbara Creed (*The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* [1993]) followed on Lacan and the French feminists, with special reference to Julia Kristeva's exploration of the cultural association between the feminine and the *abject* in her *Powers of Horror* (1982). The abject is liminal, threatening the borders of bodies, states of being, "sacred" or "safe" as reflected in rituals of cleanliness and taboos designed to separate the self from what is "properly" other. The Mother, especially, is abject, representing the subject's origin in flesh other than itself and threatening to engulf the ego. She is the archaic image of the Goddess, the threat represented by feminine otherness, parthenogenesis, and paganism. As a particularly ancient, visibly decomposing version of the Mother, the evil-eyed crone threatened dissolution confirmed in her brews of body parts and leavings, toads, and spider webs.

The abject, along with a cultural heritage of female monsters (Creed 1993), has been used to challenge criticism that represented women as victims. The most widely recognized of female monsters, the witch is "represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order", as Creed argues:

She is thought to be dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her evil powers to wreak destruction on the community. The witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary. Her evil powers are seen as part of her 'feminine' nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes and storms. (1993: 76)

Thus, according to Kristeva, women have been regarded as "baleful schemers," and the feminine made "synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed" (1982: 70).

Seizing on her subversive potential, modern and contemporary feminists have reclaimed the witch as the outspokenly pro-woman woman, the bitch: "I want to affirm the witch in me," *Ms. Magazine* editor Marcia Gillespie announced in the

October 1999 issue. This, she stressed, did “not mean going to see *The Blair Witch Project*. I don’t need a reminder that the old ‘evil witch’ stereotype lingers on. [. . .] A woman was denounced as a witch if she didn’t mind her mouth, her dress, her attitude. [. . .] Witches were said to [. . .] kill babies, enjoy sex too much or too little, steal men’s potency and their power. They were spoilers, troublemakers-unnatural. Sound familiar? No need for pointed hats or brooms or black cats. All you need [. . .] do is be a feminist.”

Gillespie took Halloween 1999 as an opportunity to celebrate the reinvention of the crone as an image of independent female power and creativity, the third aspect of the goddess and primary icon in feminist spirituality, midwifery, and ecofeminism. In putting *The Blair Witch Project* on her not-recommended list, however, she showed her awareness of the instability of the witch as an icon and the risk incurred in claiming it.

Gillespie was aware of the currency of the witch as a specifically postfeminist role model, by then recognizable as an icon for female power and assertion, often extended from the individual to the group to signify sisterhood, feminist separatism, matriarchy, and lesbianism. The witch protagonist has come to stand for the special sensitivities and desires of adolescent girls-the sense of being different and secretly empowered-and her craft represents the modern young woman learning and growing in her postfeminist sense of entitlement. The power is inherited matrilineally (with the exception of Harry Potter) and the craft is handed down from mother to daughter, or aunt to niece. (Thus the critically acclaimed independent film *Eve’s Bayou* (1997), written and directed by African American actress Kasi Lemmons, delineates witchcraft, voodoo, and foreknowledge as belonging to women’s ways of knowing and empowering themselves, both individually and as a group, and emphasizes the apprenticeship of the young female protagonist as she learns from her eccentric and sexy fortune-telling aunt.)

In 1990s popular film and television, the coven bond, Wiccan circle, and the craft had become near-metaphors for feminist sisterhood, lesbian feminism, and separatism, and for the female desire to return to/manifest the archaic Mother. Rachel in *Carrie 2: The Rage* (1998) is in love with her best friend, and her power emerges as lesbian feminist rage over her friend’s date rape, humiliation, and suicide. At first Goth, then Riot Grrrl, she emerges as a Cixousian hysterical sorceress avenging what men have done to women. *Buffy*, the series rather than the character, had “come out,” during the 1999/2000 season, as Willow Rosenberg, Buffy’s brainy best friend and the cyberwitch of the team of slayers, now in college, began exploring her powers through a transparently sexual relationship with the Wiccan sorceress, Tara. By the end of the season, this had culminated in a couple of obviously orgasmic, object-moving spells, and in public declarations of love. Producer/director Joss Whedon commented on the obtuseness of viewers who accused him of “tiptoeing” around the issue (“tiptoeing? Sounded more like clogdancing to me. Did you see that spell? Do I have to ‘Spell’ it out for you? [. . .] They’re sweeties, no way around it” [qtd. in “Joss Whedon at the Bronze, March 24, 2000”]) and stressed the show would use the relationship to show “someone exploring their sexuality, expanding it.” As for witchcraft, “It’s a very strong female community” he wanted to represent (“Joss Whedon, Interviewed on *Fresh Air*”). “I just hope we don’t get a lot of protest from Christian Right Groups over this” (“Joss Whedon at the Bronze, January 29, 2000”). Witchcraft thus came to stand for a shared female power and sexuality that neither Buffy’s slaying nor her then-on relationship with straight-arrow military issue boyfriend Reilly could evoke so well.<sup>[6]</sup> Even Sabrina’s aunts were configured as lesbian parents, despite occasional dates and boyfriends, note Sarah Projansky and Leah Vande Berg (2000: 23-24).

But postfeminist witchcraft in the late 1990s was more often airbrushed, domesticated, and self-congratulatory than genuinely subversive or even exploratory, reflecting feminism's current incorporation within the canon and containment within patriarchy. Buffy and Ally McBeal were sometimes hard to tell apart. Hollywood films such as *The Witches of Eastwick*, *Practical Magic*, and *The Craft* featured A-list actresses such as Michelle Pfeiffer, Susan Sarandon, Nicole Kidman, Sandra Bullock, and Neve Campbell as witches. As Catherine Edwards points out, primetime television "cashed in" with *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (1997-), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-), and *Charmed* (1997-) all of which featured [pretty and notably white] young females with magical powers." An issue of *Young and Modern* featured two pages on witchcraft with the banner headline "Witchy Ways!" Interviews with female stars of hit TV witch programs then told what spells the actresses would cast if they were real life witches (Edwards 1999).

Such "sisterhoods" were non-threatening because domesticated within patriarchy. Films such as Philip Ridley's *The Passion of Darkly Noon* (1995), in which a girl is hounded by her neighbors because of her self-assured sexuality, or even *Witches of Eastwick* (1987), in which the three witches played by Cher, Susan Sarandon, and Michele Pfeiffer effectively contain the devil (Jack Nicholson) and establish a matriarchy, have been rare. *Practical Magic* (1996) bent over backwards to make its witches sympathetic misfits, cursed by a heritage that condemns them to matriarchy (if they marry, their husbands will die), and who more than anything want a patriarchal family. Postfeminist witches invariably use their charms to attract men but are consequently domesticated. Similarly, in *The Craft* (1996), the coven of high school girls sacrificed its powers in order to contain the threat represented by Nancy (Fairuza Balk), who as an angry Goth, threatened to become the "evil witch" stereotype, thus to jeopardize the place women have made for themselves within patriarchy. [7] Postfeminism assumes that feminist goals of equity have been met and has been equally reflected in Joanne K. Rowling's Harry Potter and Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in which the Craft is genderless and it is cool for boys as well as girls to carry wands and ride broomsticks while playing Quiddich, a game that otherwise resembles soccer. With Buffy and Harry, the witch has become none other than "the chosen one," the child blessed but also burdened with special powers.

Thus integrated into the canon-ironically by way of feminism-as Diane Purkiss concludes in her study of *The Witch in History*, the witch is "no longer" frightening. She is "clean, pretty, an herbalist with a [. . .] career in midwifery, a feminist, sexy but nothing too kinky" (1996: 282). She is the postfeminist icon par excellence, the witch contained, domesticated. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created by the self-proclaimed male feminist Joss Whedon, is keener than most in commenting on this fact. In "Hush," a February 2000 *Buffy* episode, Willow complains that her campus Wiccan group is "Talk, all talk. Blah, blah, Gaia. Blah, blah, moon. Menstrual life-force thingy. [. . .] Bunch of wanna blessed be's. Nowadays every girl with a henna tattoo and a spice rack thinks she's a sister with the dark ones" ("Hush"). The darkness is merely metaphorical-in several senses. Even keener was *Mad TV's* "Blair Witch Report" skit, followed by a composite parody of the teen shows on the WB, "Pretty White Kids With Problems."

This soft, white, liberal, politically-correct witch has put considerable fear in some hearts, however-those on the religious right, to whom she represented a growing threat to monotheistic orthodoxy and the patriarchal family. Most notably, the Harry Potter books, in breaking records for printing and sales and thrilling reading teachers, have alarmed many fundamentalist Christians. Quoting the author's

often cited remark about her attraction to the idea of "a child who escapes from the confines of the adult world and goes somewhere where he has power, both literally and metaphorically [. . .]," a Web site devoted to *Exposing Satanism* finds the Potter books "nothing more than [sic] Satan's way to undermine the family " ("Harry Potter" 2000). Several Christian organizations have become concerned with what they perceive, in books that offer children an alternative apprenticeship in Hogwarts, as a move to infiltrate the schools and indoctrinate children, "the oldest marketing scheme there is" ("Harry Potter" 2000).

Certainly when one looks at the larger picture, there is more at stake than entertainment. Recently *Jane* magazine featured Phyllis Currott, attorney and author of *The Book of Shadows: A Modern Woman's Journey into the Wisdom of Witchcraft and the Magic of the Goddess*, as one of their "Gutsiest women of the year" (Edwards). Says Currott, "Feminism became incorporated into the culture 20 years ago. [. . .] The next step was to look at the bastion of misogyny-religion. Mothers and daughters looked to religious institutions and found there was nothing there for them" (qtd. in Edwards). Some members of the Christian fundamentalist right view the Harry Potter books (1999-) with alarm, as being in collusion with a one-world/feminist "program" for inculcating children with a pagan ("global and occult") world view. In an article warning Christians against this "New Twist to Witchcraft," Berit Kjos of *Worthy News*, a Web site devoted to "News with a Christian View," quotes Naomi Goldenberg's *Changing of the Gods*: "We, women are going to bring an end to God. We will change the world so much that He won't fit in anymore." Goldenberg and "other radical feminists must appreciate Ms Rowling's part in this process," Kjos comments. Indeed, your child's education by way of Harry Potter's enlightenment by way of Hogwarts "fits right into the international program for multicultural education" whose "common set of values [. . .] excludes traditional beliefs as intolerant and narrow. [. . .] The Biblical God simply doesn't fit into his world of wizards, witches, and other gods" (Kjos).

*Blair Witch* played on these "spiritual"-sectarian, political, and gender-related-anxieties, many of which found a focus in witch-themed popular culture. Christian and family-oriented publications such as *Focus on the Family* found surprisingly "positive elements" in the film. "Unlike the glamorized portrayals of witchcraft [. . .] in [. . .] the popular media," this film "convinces viewers that witches are scary, evil and undesirable. [. . .] supernatural beings and witches do exist, and a healthy fear of such is proper [. . .]" (Isaac 1999). *Hollywood Jesus*, a site devoted to exploring "Pop Culture from a Spiritual Point of View," found *Blair Witch* "profoundly spiritual," unafraid "to exploit our sense and belief in spiritual evil" (Bruce 2000). As one viewer commented, "people better wake up and open a BIBLE" (Servant 2000). "IT TOTALLY SURPRISED ME, all the people, that thought the B.W.P. horror wasn't real. How can anybody that believes in GOD and the bible believe that wasn't real [. . .]" (Anthony 2000). [8]

As the *Project's* real filmmakers probably knew, there was no *better* time to bring back today's teen witch's repressed older, weirder sister. The *Blair Witch* would be everything but clean, pretty, and sexy. She would be a victim of persecution and also of a kind of popular postfeminist cooption, and she would be mad as hell. Heather's journal, written by Heather Donohue in character, and as expanded in the *Dossier*, tells us as much. Searching for documentaries about witchcraft at Blockbuster and finding "The occult experience," an Australian NC 17 documentary that had "nothing more than 'witch tits.' Young attractive witches, maybe that's the problem," she concludes, writing "I would like mine to be better. [. . .] I guess that all depends on Elly" (Stern 1999: 153). [9]

**"All of Them Witches"-*Rosemary's Baby* (1968)**

Considering the diversity of this discourse, it would seem that Heather's documentary succeeded beyond her wildest dreams. [10] Still, the Blair Witch mythology, as presented by the Web site, the mock-documentary *The Curse of the Blair Witch*, the film proper, and the *Dossier* begins in the late 1700s, "like all other witch stories and legends," says Professor Moorehouse, with "an old, haggard woman" (*Curse* 1999): the "history" is that of Elly Kedward, an old woman accused by a young girl in 1785 of using pinpricks to draw blood from several local children, to "make 'magic potions'" (Stern 1999: 109). Kedward is tried, convicted, and banished to the forest, where during the winter, she is presumed to have died. The Web site, documentary and dossier all show woodcuts depicting the shunning, featuring Elly, bound on a wheelbarrow and banished to the woods. The following winter, all of her accusers and more than half the town's children disappear, and the township of Blair itself vanishes. In subsequent incidents, recurring in approximately fifty- or sixty-year cycles, "an old woman" is held responsible for the deaths/disappearances of numerous children-including Eileen Treacle, a child "pulled down" in 1828 into Tappey Creek and drowned, another little girl who reports seeing an old woman floating above the ground, a five-man search party found dead on Coffin Rock in 1886 (with the disemboweled and ritualistically inscribed bodies disappearing immediately thereafter), and seven children buried by Rustin Parr, a 1940s serial killer who claims to have been instructed by the voice of an old woman. Elly is typically accused by a "little girl" or "young lady" (*Curse* 1999), although the original challenge, trial, and shunning were the work of the community as a whole.

Perhaps most obviously, as Mallin has noted, Elly is depicted as a devourer of children (2001: 109-110), [11] capable of swallowing a whole town (and possessing and/or disemboweling weak men who invade her territory). The ultimate negative mother, she reproduces by incorporating the lives of children into "her" history, which is the record of their disappearance.

But, as the Wiccans noticed, the Blair Witch experience as a whole, particularly the *Curse* documentary pre-text, is no open and shut case. Both the Wiccan priest and Professor Moorehouse portray Elly as a victim, as an unconventional healer who bled the children as medical procedure. "The Sci-Fi Channel special suggests that Elly Kedward was misjudged, and accused by the children she was only trying to help," comments WitchVox's Peg Aloï, arguing that the "so-called 'curse'" arose "because some higher power deemed what happened to Elly such a great injustice, that the area's inhabitants were doomed [. . .]" (1999). Her interpretation contradicts *The Cult of the Blair Witch*, a book purportedly written "around the turn of the century" by a Satanic cult (Stern 1999: 113). This "apocryphal" text, as read by Bill Barnes, official Burkittsville historian, in the documentary, sounds like a cheesy horror movie-"The awful hag wrenched the boy's head from his writhing body and defiled the church with his warm blood"-but one that Barnes pronounces "Pretty factual" (*Curse* 1999). Thus, like the shifting surfaces of Blairwitch.com, the Sci Fi network documentary offers contradictory interpretations and bewildering doublings throughout.

One well-known characteristic of the historical witch crazes was the way they swept the accuser up with the accused, as the attributes of the bewitched and the witch became interchangeable, configured in terms of possession (by or intercourse with the Devil) and then, after Charcot and Freud, as hysteria. In the Salem witch trials of 1692-1693, the "afflicted" girls were recognized as such through their "hysterical" practice of sorcery; their sorcery in turn "exposed" Tituba's "sorcery," and so on. [12] *The Malleus Maleficarum* (1484), an inquisitor's manual for the prosecution of witchcraft, similarly collapsed female victims and victimizers together as "other" and as susceptible to possession by

the Devil (Kramer and Sprenger 1971: 43-44). Similarly, the *Blair Witch* texts repeatedly conflated the identities of the witnesses-the afflicted accusers-and the accused by visually identifying female witnesses as eccentric crones or posing them as witches. In several "authentic" woodcuts, Elly is rendered both as early modern victim (tied to a tree and left to die in the woods) and as a Medusan monster with snaky hair.

These associations are echoed in the characterization of a prime "witness" and (as the film presents her) suspect, Mary Brown, Burkittsville's "crazy old woman." Heather interviews Mary early in the film (as Josh films in black and white 16 mm) and she testifies to having seen a woman with black hair ("like a horse") all over her body floating above the ground. But Mary is herself a dead ringer for the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*; her dark, unkempt, stringy hair, bushy eyebrows, beaked nose, sunken cheeks and prominent chin lend guilt by visual association with the Halloween stereotype *and* Elly Kedward. Thus, in accusing Elly, Mary implicates herself.

At the same time, Mary's testimony, relating to events which allegedly took place at Tappey Creek during Mary's girlhood, resembles the story of the drowned child Eileen Treacle, associating her with Elly's victims-or a victim's ghost. But a closer *look* at Mary and her environs undermines any interpretation. Visually an unstable signifier, she carries a Bible and displays an American flag in her trailer window while, as Heather's camera notes in an unsteady zoom, her gate is a bizarre construction of sticks tied with string. The film team will encounter this configuration in the woods in several of the *Blair Witch Project's* most terrifying incidents: in the stick figures that became iconic for the film as a whole, and in a bundle of sticks similarly tied to enclose what appears to be bloody body parts wrapped in a fragment of Josh's shirt. Perhaps most interestingly, weird Mary parodies Heather's own pretensions as a would-be auteur, cultural anthropologist, and witch hunter intent on recovering Elly's legacy and energy, as a conversation between Josh and Heather implicitly acknowledges. "Too bad she's not in the film business," comments Josh after Mary's interview. "She says she *is* in the film business," replies Heather. She's been a ballerina and she's been a scientist with the Department of Energy." [13]

Altogether, Mary's testimony is multivalenced in its effect, a site in which the knowingly "fake" is in dialogue with the historically "real." It seems to be an intertextual reference aimed at a potential cult audience, and ultimately to the cultist who will recognize in Mary's profound semiotic instability the film's principle of uncertainty. But it also, perhaps primarily, serves to add to the "hystericizing" dispersion of meaning in the film.

Yet Mary is merely the most striking of various witchy doubles among the Burkittsville witnesses. For instance, in the film an unnamed mother tells some of the story and expresses her belief in it, as her distressed child repeatedly covers her mother's mouth and screams "No." In the documentary, Dottie Fulcher, a search party volunteer and unofficial historian, has been possessed with enough zeal to antagonize law enforcement authorities, telling them to "look to the past for the answers," stressing that "Elly chooses her time to appear." Her search is not for Heather so much as it is identical with Heather's desire for the archaic Mother/Elly, whose "true" story (and power) is manifested in Heather's fate.

### **Heather the Bitch, Bad Mother, Techno-witch**

The back-story of Elly Kedward and other crafty women who devour men and make children disappear is repeated in the primary narrative concerning Heather Donohue's film project. Also lurking intertextually behind the scenes is the

familiar folktale of Hansel and Gretel: of children lost in the woods, who stumble upon a witch's house, where in the *Blair Witch Project* the footage stops. Finally, there is an unstated, assumed connection between feminism, women who use technology, and witchcraft that the film draws on for character delineation and gender-based conflict. In the film proper, it is subtle enough to go almost unremarked, one exception being *Village Voice's* J. Hoberman, who notes how the movie leaves "the sly suggestion that the project's real witch might be the driven director, Heather."

Heather is a "film school type" whose characterization also subtly suggests the witch in all of that icon's guises. Described by best friend Rachel, Heather is "Completely obsessed. [. . .] The film was all she talked about," so that "we kind of drifted apart" (*Curse* 1999; Stern 1999: 66). "Ouja boards, tarot cards-you name it, she had it." As for sex, she "just wasn't into that. I mean, she dated a little" (Stern 1999: 66). (Heather's journal confirms that: "Boy bonding. I am definitely out of that. Must stop worrying about being the bitchy boss lady. They need to know that I am in charge [. . .]" [Stern 1999: 152]). Asked what was "on Heather's mind, Rachel replies, "Finding a sound guy" (Stern 1999: 66). "Something about her rubbed me the wrong way," testifies Lisa, Josh's former girlfriend, representing Heather as a man-eater: "I just didn't want him to go off with her like that" (*Curse* 1999).

Heather's "witch hunt" has complex motivations: on one level, Heather is identified with the patriarchal community in "investigating" Elly and thus, in effect, accusing her of witchcraft and shunning her yet again; on another, she is identified with her as a shunned, singular woman who, as she speculates in her journal of 10/16/94, may have "become a survivalist and killed out of self defense?" (Stern 1999: 151); on another, she identifies with her as a powerful, focused woman with access to an "occult" technology. As WitchVox notes, "Heather researched Neo-Paganism and modern Witchcraft in the hopes of understanding the continuity of magic and the ancient legacy of North American witchcraft folklore" (Aloi 1999).

Heather is the "postfeminist" daughter of second-wave feminism. Like television's Sabrina, as described by Susan Orlean, she is "independent, spunky, friendly with boys but not obsequious toward them, moderately athletic, [. . .] and assertive in the way that only girls who have grown up taking feminism for granted are able to be" (qtd. in Projansky and Vande Berg 2000: 15). (Heather might be Sabrina's strident older sister.) Her politics are situational and personal, pertaining to issues of autonomy, self-culture, and personal power rather than women as a group (Stacey 1983: 562). As the DVD production notes boast, she is "Not the typical heroine-led-to-slaughter, " she "retains control of her character as a tough-minded director in charge." "She's real," says Donahue: "She's obsessive about getting her project done, and she's ambitious, driven, and smart'" (*The Blair Witch Project*, 1999). She is, in other words, the "postfeminist" bitch, the witch's now "politically correct" avatar or alter ego. Her "craft" is her film school project, to which she seems prepared to sacrifice her crew. In much the same way she takes feminism for granted, she assumes the history and powers of the witch are hers for the taking. Thus her project, which might seem a form of respect, becomes an act of transgression and cooption bringing forth the witch's angry, darker double.

For horror film fans, tuned into slasher conventions by the genre/gender self-reflexivity of *Scream*, Heather is initially presented as the slasher film's "final girl" as analyzed by Carol Clover. She is the androgynous, "intelligent, watchful, level-headed" protagonist, the one character "developed in any psychological detail" and who, above all, will survive because of her ability to analyze evidence and

understand and predict the threat (Clover 1992: 44). But if Heather looks and acts much like a Ripley (*Alien*, 1979, through *Alien Resurrection*, 1997) or a Nancy (*Nightmare on Elm Street*, 1984-), she notably does *not* survive, breaking one of the essential rules. And as gender-aware horror fans would also recognize, as the project's "tough-minded director in charge," Heather represents a serious breach in having taken possession of the conventionally male-and often murderous-gaze. [14] This antagonizes her crew members and the witch, whose territory she is invading in several senses. Ultimately, she is the postfeminist bitch, a woman who presumes to be a director, interrogates the Blair Witch, and flaunts her disregard for sacrosanct traditions, territories, and borders.

From the first frame, of Heather gazing intently into the camera, arms outstretched, then flaunting her long, straight, dark hair, she is visually typed. (Early in *The Curse of the Blair Witch* and featured in the *Dossier*, a pen and ink drawing depicts the Blair Witch in a similar pose-with clawlike arms outstretched, the outline of her breasts visible, long hair askew, and a confrontational Medusan stare.) Later, in the woods, Josh catches Heather in the bushes. "Is that the Blair Witch?" he asks. "No, I think it's Heather, taking a piss." As Mallin explains, "In Josh's mind, this dominating and urinating woman who has doomed them all to probable death is contiguous to the figure they now flee" (2001: 110). As Diane Purkiss reminds us from a historical perspective, the witch is traditionally the "bad"-threatening (overbearing, abject, and sterile) or negligent anti-mother (1996: 99-100).

Mallin stresses Heather's dual role as child and negative maternal figure, which doubles her representation of the witch as a threat to children and as the future of life itself (2001: 109-111). Simultaneously bossy, shrill, and maternal, Heather treats her two-man crew rather like her teenaged children. (On the second day, after some good-natured banter, Heather says of her last-ditch sound man, "I must admit I'm pleased with our little Mikey." Pause. "A very spirited young man." Later, in a burst of maternal efficiency, Heather makes a point of sewing up the crotch hole in Mike's pants.) As they get increasingly exhausted and hungry, Josh and Mike accuse her of being a negligent parent, of getting them lost in the woods. Most importantly, she keeps on filming, as a display of barely maintained control, and (as Telotte suggests) as a means of separating herself from their shared terror and to replicate her project/herself in the film. In so doing, she becomes associated with the Blair Witch, the sterile, negative mother who "eats" children.

### **Gender Trouble 1: The Inquisition**

"Gender dynamics between Heather and the two male crew members" make *The Blair Witch* "an outstanding horror project.[. . .]," the DVD notes inform the avid viewer, another example of the extended text's deconstruction of itself, in this instance in a parody of academic sociological jargon: "[T]een slasher films often rely on gender clichés [sex], the *Blair Witch* filmmakers instead develop contextual relationships between characters and document co-dependencies." The DVD notes emphasize, unctuously, that while the young men acknowledge Heather as the boss, she still must deal with "constant mistrust at every turn." They then quote Donohue: "People often unconsciously second-guess a woman who's in a position of authority." To translate: Although a bitch, Heather is not *the* witch.

This triangle (female boss, two male slackers) is ideally designed to bring out gender conflicts that echo the situations out of which many witch hunts developed. As early as 1587, George Gifford described the formula: "Some woman doth fal out bitterly with her neighbour: there followeth some great hurt.

[. . .] There is a suspicion conceived" (qtd. in Dolan). The first major dispute involves Heather's map and, in a larger sense, her directorial vision. While Heather professes to know by the map exactly where they are, Mike protests disgustedly that "This is Greek to me. It's useless" (eventually kicking it into the creek). In addition to "usurping" male technologies, assuming control over history, geography (map, compass), and gaze (camera), Heather claims esoteric knowledge of the witch and the craft that is unavailable to the "boys." For them, all signs of power collapse into the miasma of the occult, transformed into "witch's language."

Ultimately, as Mike says, both their the project and their survival depend on communal trust, which breaks down completely over the issue of Heather's insistence on documenting their experience, reactions, emotions, incorporating them into her project:

Mike: "So I'm just like . . . putting my trust in you. . . . although I tell you I don't fully trust you, and I, ummmm. [. . .] I don't know why you have to get everything on video."

Heather: "We're making a documentary."

Mike: "Not about us getting lost. We're making a documentary about a *witch*."

Heather: "*I* have a camera."

As she continues to film them and their fear, Mike and Josh become increasingly hostile. "Turn off the camera and show us the way home," Josh yells: "we're lost and you're going around doing your documentary *thing*, man. You're still doin' your goddamn thing. Turn the fuckin' thing off."

The equation between the witch, the bitch (Heather), and filmmaking becomes a self-referential joke that works down to the bewitching (famously nauseating) camera work. Mike and Josh view her as stealing what little power they have left for her project, and accuse her of collusion with the witch, staging an inquisition. On the fourth day, Josh attempts a mutiny, turns the camera on Heather, and assumes (male) directorial control, positioning her as the subordinate child, actress, and sobbing, abject-ified suspect:

"We're gonna make movies, Heather. Isn't that what we're here to do? Let's make some movies.[. . .]"

"Ok. Here's your motivation! You're lost, you're angry, in the woods, and no one is here to help you. There's a fuckin' witch and she keeps leaving shit outside your door. [. . .] We walked for fifteen hours today. We ended up in the same place. That's your motivation."

Telotte rightly emphasizes this scene in his discussion of the film's challenge to the cinema and our relationship to it, to technology in general, and the media's usual "filtering effect." Josh is trying to break the camera's hold, which Heather uses to retreat from the horror of their situation (2001: 38).**[15]** However, the sequence also implicates Heather in a "crime" that aligns her with the witch. "A witch is stalking us and she's still makin' movies," he shouts at Heather and Mike simultaneously: "That's my point."

## Gender Trouble 2: Confession, Abjection, Dispossession

The mounting suspicion and hysteria culminate in Heather's sobbing, endless confession to the camera, supporting her characterization as the witch who admits to using sorcery to harm her neighbors:

"I just want to apologize to Josh's mom, to Mike's mom, and to my mom. And to everybody. I am so sorry for everything that has happened. Because it was my fault. Because I insisted. [. . .] Everything had to be my way, and this is where we ended up. And it's all because of me that we're here now, hungry, cold, and hunted. I love you Mom and Dad. I am so sorry. [. . .] [pauses] I 'm scared to close my eyes. I'm scared to open them. [. . . she hyperventilates] . We're gonna die out here."

Through subtly established links between witchcraft, feminism, and filmmaking, possession, and dispossession of the gaze, the film suggests that the classic "bitch" has transgressed invisible boundaries of gender and power and provoked the return of her darker double, the evil witch, who puts her in her place-in several senses. First, as in the early modern witch trials, and repeating Elly Kedrick, Heather, chief victim as well as the immediate culprit, must "confess" her craft, apologize to those she has harmed, and go on to "die out there."

Second, in this endlessly duplicated image, Heather is associated with the abject and archaic Mother-with dismemberment, emissions, and banishment-as exhibited most graphically in the bloody bundle of teeth and flesh that she finds outside her tent and in the confessional scene that appeared in the film's trailer and was endlessly parodied, where Heather's camera grotesquely shows one quarter of her face, one terrified, tearing eye, and the interior of one dripping nostril. While we obviously share Heather's threatened subjectivity in this scene, we are also returned to the pre-Oedipal child's position-of being threatened and revulsed *by* the monstrously magnified fragment of "Mommy's face."

It is perhaps more important, though, that Heather is forced to turn the camera on herself-to abjectify herself, look her monstrosity in the face. Her punishment is in line with Linda Williams' argument that the woman who returns the look of the monster (in recognition of a sexual difference similar to her own) must be punished both for being monstrous, and for looking, for aligning herself with the (male) gaze. Her look is her punishment, wherein she identifies the monster as a mirror image of herself. (Thus in Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* [1960], the filmmaker/killer forces the victim to witness her death-via camera tripod-in a distorted mirror/lens.) Articulating this classic horror movie trope (if from a perspective that makes it nearly unrecognizable), Heather is defined simultaneously as abject victim and monstrous feminine, hysteric and sorceress.

### **[16]**

It is in this scene above all that "the witch" avenges Heather's movie making, stealing back her stolen power by hystericizing the gaze, dispossessing its "usurping" director, "possessing" and repossessing the camera. The film identifies the source of evil within "female" nature, as both residing in and avenged on the project's female director and the camera which (in "found footage") takes on a life of its own. Moreover, the gaze itself is "punished" in the process, as it is destabilized by whatever natural/supernatural force the witch represents. One of the most parodied elements of the *Blair Witch Project* emerged from the discrepancy between Heather's film-school auteurism-her obsession with realizing her "vision"-and her (albeit crew-assisted) unstable/destabilized camera work. In culminating scenes where Heather is a blur disappearing into wavering white tree trunks or in the final shots of Mike literally cornered, with the dislocated sound of

Heather screaming in the distance, it seems that the gaze is "possessed" or has been repossessed by nature. Or the gaze is "hystericized," culminating in what Keller calls a "postmodern witch craze." This film survives, as Mallin and Telotte suggest, as a testimonial to the end of cinema.

### **Which Cult?: Conclusions**

To return to my original question: Why the Blair *witch*? Or, as Peg Aloï asked it, "Why not the Blair Ghost Project? Or the Blair Banshee Project or the Blair Vampire Project?" (Sanchez and Myrick, "Interview" 1999). What conclusions can be drawn? Was the *Project* progressive or conservative, pro-witch or anti-witch, profeminist or antifeminist?

Certainly *Blair Witch* seemed to suggest an anti-feminist response to female power in general and within filmmaking in particular-in the sense that it demonstrates what happens when a woman calls the shots. The "bad" witch of the West had won. Heather's postfeminist filmmaking, constructed as transgressive and cooptive-an attempt to tap into the crone's power-had instead been incorporated into the crone's misogynistic legacy. The evil witch stereotype that feminists had viewed as a patriarchal/papist plot had won this battle. Might her return have signaled a backlash, a reversion to patriarchal, monotheistic repression?

But I agree equally with the comment made by Buffy's Wiccan roommate Willow in the episode "Hush," aired in December 1999. By 1999, witchcraft, now more or less canonized, had indeed become "talk." Media witches had gotten too sweet, pretty, and complacent; they were little girls too intent on making straight "A's." In the context of that Gen-X, postfeminist complacency, the crone, represented through her occult language and through her hystericizing affect, was transgressive. And in its postmodern, history-interrogating, discourse-provoking instability *Blair Witch* seemed, at least potentially, progressive. As Dottie Fulcher-the ardent, pro-Elly search party volunteer, the *unofficial* Burkittsville "historian," and yet another formidable old woman with unkempt, stringy hair-opines at the conclusion of *The Curse of the Blair Witch*,

"I think [those kids] knew the legend but I don't think they knew the whole history. I don't think they felt any fear but I don't think they felt any kind of respect. [. . .] It was just another project [. . .] a way to get a grade, but I think they met her and [. . .] she met them when she was ready to and I think they are gone."

Thanks to Heather's project, Gen-Xers returned to "the legend," and a cult film was born. The real bitch-the evil crone-was back, infusing the white witch's too sweet and complacent present with her legacy of repression, hysteria, and rage. She had returned to restore the balance of power in the monster pantheon, reminding us that, as Barbara Creed has stressed, women in horror movies are not always victims or goodie-goodies. Or as one reviewer noted of *Exorcist 2000*, at the heart of that film's misogyny, "in paranoid, bad-acid-trip form," was the first blast of riot girl power ("You Go, Ghoulfriend"). *Blair Witch* may have been the first recent manifestation of really nasty (or was it healthy?) crone power. And rather than blanching beside it, or being swallowed up in it, the more recent Willow-the (hysterical?) sorceress who has avenged Tara's murder by killing Warren-seems to have tapped into it.

*Blair Witch* reinvested the horror film with respect for the "woods"-the power in "female" nature-for Kali, Medusa, and the Crone. Rather than reproduce stock images of gore, the film plunged audiences into semiotic flux. Through the

volatility of the figure of the witch, and instead of being subjected to monstrous-feminine “splatter,” audiences were immersed in something like the psychic experience it represented—the condition of the unformed subject (à la Creed and Kristeva). Lost in the shifting surfaces of the fragments of this “film,” “we” became scared “out of our wits,” out of our conventional or “proper” sense of what was real and what was fantasy, to the point, in some instances, of becoming nauseated.

But it is worth noting that the image of Heather as the would-be director turning the camera on herself, and made hysterical/abject by her own film, came to stand in the promotional materials and later, in an endless series of parodies, as a synecdoche for the Blair Witch hysteria as a whole. The titles of the parodies alone suggest the way that the witch was reduced to a stock image and circulated (they associate the image with female sexuality, specifically pornography, or with ethnic and racial stereotypes): *The Bare Wench Project* (1999), in which rednecks agree to answer questions if the filmmakers expose their breasts; *The Erotic Witch Project* (1999), in which the female filmmakers are sexually aroused by an orgasmic woman’s moans; and *The Bogus Witch Project* (2000), a collection of short films including *The Watts Bitch Project*, *The Blair Underwood Witch*, *The Griffith Witch Project*, and *The Willie Witch Projects*. The notable elements in the latter collection, according to reviewer G. Noel Gross (2001), are “No breasts. Ear munching. Puking. Gratuitous urination. [. . .] Flatulence humor. Blurry porno footage. One pimp. Gratuitous poop closeup. Excessive lenscap humor.” From this perspective, Heather’s ambition to make a documentary, a “true” film to counter all the Blockbuster “witch tits” seems to have failed miserably.

*Blair Witch* was eventually recognized less for being at the vanguard of a radically indeterminate independent film movement—Dogme had preceded it in conscientious naïveté, and recent experimental, dark indies such as *Memento*, *Donnie Darko*, *Mulholland Drive* are more different than similar—than for a wave of cheap, digital, shaky-cam imitations and parodies. Also, in spite of or, rather, through its use of postmodern indeterminacy and “Word of mouse,” *Blair Witch* seems to have led a return to anxious spirituality, gnosticism, and conservative supernaturalism evident in the spate of apocalyptic pre-millennial thrillers including *The Haunting* (1999), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Stigmata* (1999), *Stir of Echoes* (2000), *Lost Souls* (2000), *End of Days* (2000), *The Exorcist 2000*, and *Bless the Child* (2001). Where postmodern splatter film had envisioned culture as material, constructed, and capable of change, the new supernaturalism, which suggested an omnipresent, transcendent evil or apocalyptic destiny, most clearly did not.

Like most cult phenomena, the original *Blair Witch* was partly cultural resonance, partly “happy” coincidence. As Dan Myrick explained to Peg Aloi, the directors invented the situation (three film students making a documentary in the woods), designing their promotional campaign and method filmmaking strategy long before they happened on the witch. The witch was an apolitical, even coincidental choice, or so they claim:

we needed a reason for them to be out in the woods, and have a mythology that they explore, and being in that part of the country, the Northeast, there’s a lot of witch folklore out there. We’re trying to keep it real, you know? We’re not saying, well okay we have something against witches so let’s do a witch movie. It’s more like, what would logically be out there?” (Sanchez and Myrick, “Interview” 1999).

And they tapped what was “logically” out there. In a deliberate reversal, the sequel, *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000) was designed to be stylistically

conventional, even generic, but ideologically progressive. In a WitchVox interview, director and co-writer Joe Berlinger, distinguished for his documentaries *Brother's Keeper* (1992), *Paradise Lost* (1996), and *Paradise 2: Revelations* (2000), explained:

Calling [the film] "Book of Shadows" was my way of confronting people's stereotypes. [. . .] of playing with people's expectations, and the cultural hysteria that the first movie wrought. Everyone came away from the first Blair Witch movie thinking the witch was somehow responsible for what happened, even though there are plenty of other interpretations. In this film, I wanted to make one of the interpretations that the origin of evil may be human instead of supernatural. (Berlinger, "Interview" 2000)

*Book of Shadows* was essentially an anti-sequel, a film that theorized the hysteria, the blurring of fantasy and reality, and the ideological conflicts that had informed the strategy and subtext of the first film and made it a cult phenomenon, to the extent that two of its student characters were writing a graduate thesis titled "The Blair Witch: History or Hysteria." While this self-consciousness was understood, the film's progressivism went virtually unnoticed. As Telotte notes, "it is clearly difficult to design a film for cult status. [. . .] and trying to dictate desire seems almost inimical to the cult spirit," as the failure of *Rocky Horror's* sequel confirmed (1991: 15). And *Book of Shadows* was reviewed superficially, deemed "another self-aware teen slasher" and perceived as conventional-in part because it used stereotyped teenaged characters to represent the diversity of cult groups that gave themselves over to the first film: Erica, teen Wiccan; Kim, the Goth, and so on. In interviews and on the DVD commentary Berlinger has defended his work admirably as a stark and conceptual contrast to the perceived naiveté of the original *Project*, thus bewildering or, more often, offending serious Blairheads. As for the witch in *Blair Witch 2*, as described by WitchVox spokeswoman Peg Aloï, she is a "slender, sensual nymphet bedecked with silver jewelry, a defender of modern witchcraft and identified with Elly Kedward's persecution at the hands of bigots. Neopagan platitudes fall easily from Erica's lips"-the actress reportedly read ten Llewellyn best sellers on the Craft assigned by Berlinger ("Review of Book of Shadows" 2000). After a frenzied erotic performance of a Satanic rite, Erica ends up repeating Elly's fate as the sacrificial victim (who also commits murder). In the style of the teen slasher, from *Halloween* to *Scream*, it is Erica's eroticized, made-object body that signifies horror as it is found nude, standing in a closet, with no one able to account for how she/it got there.

As in *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*, as explained by J. P. Telotte (1991), *Blair Witch* originated as an open, transgressive, hystericizing experience, a site that excited discourse-indeed, the sort of thing the *Worthy News Website* has called "spiritual warfare." It ended with business as usual, as the promotional materials, parodies, sequel, and paraphernalia reproduced the now-standard images and closed down dialogue. By reducing "found footage" and the witchery of semiotic play to stock images, media commentary, reception study, and cultural analysis, as I am doing at this very moment, the sequels absorbed and contained the excessive energy and quelled the Blair Witch cult.

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## Notes

[1] J. P. Telotte (2001), for example, explains the film's ability to induce panic through its hypertextual indeterminacy. Somewhat similarly, Eric S. Mallin relates it to the Y2K hysteria (2001: 111). Three Maryland college students, armed with automobile, map, compass, cameras, sound equipment, enough "fucking battery power [. . . to] fund a small-world [sic] country" (*Blair Witch Project*, 1999), and confidence made bold by ignorance, find their technology worse than useless, other than for measuring their lostness from any objective truth. Absolute reality is the horrifying truth that there is no longer any unmediated reality (Telotte). [back](#)

[2] Made on a shoestring budget by a group of University of Central Florida students, *The Blair Witch Project* was, as J. P. Telotte and James Keller, among others have pointed out, both much more and much less than a film. Directors Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez famously called it "method filmmaking": they gave the actors (film students playing film students) rough outlines of the plot, sent them into the woods and ordered them, like Marines at boot camp, to survive and shoot a movie. Heather, the actor-director, was in effect the director for the shoot. The directors removed themselves from the rational process of making the film, as James Keller has noted, producing it through something more like witchcraft-through "terrorizing the players and disrupting the shoot," hence breaching the artist/subject, author/performer binaries (2000: 78). In part because film itself was inept and incomplete (albeit deliberately so), the *Project* was a brilliantly constructed hoax-or hex-causing hundreds of teenagers to descend on Burkittsville, Maryland, population 214, to conduct their own personal witch hunts. [back](#)

[3] *The Blair Witch Experience* (2001), a three-disc box set including the 1999 film and the 2000 sequel, various trailers, documentaries, directors' commentaries, and production notes, *The Blair Witch PC Games Collection*, and an "exclusive pewter Stickman Necklace," further replicated that experience of immersion while referring the avid fan back to the ever proliferating archive on the official Web site, in the *Blair Witch Project WebRing*, and beyond. [back](#)

The elements that came to constitute the film's back-story differed from conventional promotional materials, as Telotte emphasizes: the Web site (without which the film proper cannot really be understood), a series of increasingly more informative trailers, a sixty-minute television program broadcast on the Sci-Fi channel, which pitched itself as a documentary about the disappearance of three student filmmakers while making a documentary about a legendary witch near Burkittsville, Maryland, and the simultaneously issued *Dossier* edited by "D. A. Stern," a purported compilation of authentic looking documents, backed up and extended the materials on the Web site and the film proper.

Soon, competing volumes appeared, notably the an "unauthorized" compilation represented a "repressed" oral history of colonial witch legends, *Beyond Blair Witch: The Haunting of America from the Carlisle Witch to the Real Ghosts of Burkittsville* (2000), edited by N. E. Genge (whose name cannily echoes the ubiquitous D. A. Stern). Such intertexts are indistinguishable from an apparently endless series of pseudo-documents, including the film sequel *Blair Witch: Book of Shadows* (2000, whose title evokes the occult authority of the Wiccan bible),

and whose dossier was also edited by D. A. Stern. Genge, like Stern, has plentiful "evidence" but no documentation, even as she questions conflicting promotional statistics. The film was "short for a mere \$25,00 (or \$33,000, or \$60,000, depending on which publication and expense sheet you read" (Genge, 2000: 1). [back](#)

[4] In editorial feedback of 18 June 2002. [back](#)

[5] This, Diane Purkiss argues, is understandable in the context of women's designated roles under patriarchy. In an era when a housewife's role involved maintaining "boundaries between nature and culture, between inside and outside, pollution and purity" (Purkiss, 1996: 97), women of good social standing often accused older and poorer women of sorcery for some perceived violation or pollution of the household, such as food poisoning, illness in general, or "bad luck." This configuration of the witch craze as "feminine," inherent either in female nature or female culture or, somehow both, was only enhanced through its association, especially after Charcot's visual case studies and Freud's *Studies in Hysteria*, with female madness. [back](#)

[6] Analyzing Willow and Tara's relationship from the perspective of early film, which linked witchcraft with homosexual transgression, Tanya Krzywinska stresses that it is remarkable for being handled "delicately" and without any suggestion of perversion (2002: 191). [back](#)

[7] Krzywinska (2000), ch. 4, 117-56, argues somewhat similarly that the cinematic witch "embodies the contradictions and tensions women experience in their domestic lives and familial relationships" (118). [back](#)

[8] *Blair Witch* seems to have terrified some teenagers back into the fold, working much like a Hell House-referring to the right-wing Halloween alternative haunted houses that have spread throughout the U.S. and now constitute a kind of pop-spiritual warfare against the left. As exemplified in George Ratliffe's documentary *Hell House*, these depict, in a series of scenarios, suspiciously enthusiastic Christian teenagers enacting the fate of teenagers undergoing botched abortions, dying of AIDS or a drunken car accident, and going to Hell. [back](#)

[9] Evidently, however, as signaled by their production company's name and logo, the Haxan five had discovered at least one excellent pre-text, Benjamin Christiansen's silent classic *Häxan* (1922), recently released as a Criterion Collection DVD (2001). This "pre-documentary" (documentary film was not a "genre" at the time) or pseudo-documentary/cinéma vérité experiment pretended to be a comprehensive and objective account of the European witch craze, with much emphasis on the victimization of elderly and "different" looking women. At the same time, as Krzywinska (2000) argues, the film functioned equally as an exploitation film, particularly in an extended sequence focusing on repressed/possessed/dancing nuns (8-12). "Although the documentary sections and the intertitles speak a rationalist language, the fictional sequences, which compose the majority of the film, are invested with a powerful force of fantasy and desire, putting pressure on the usual distinction between fact and fantasy" (Krzywinska, 2000: 9). Complexifying the text further, auteur director Christiansen plays the diagetic role of the devil as a leering satyr who whips nuns and goodwives alike into hysterical frenzies in several sequences and, in an introduction to the 1940 rerelease, comments on the self-reflexivity of his role. [back](#)

[10] Caught at the center of the uproar, in several senses, was yet another vocal interest group-that of several Burkittsville citizens who created a Web site (*The*

*Witches of Burkittsville*, <http://www.Burkittsville.org>) out of indignant self-defense, protesting that theirs was a peaceful Christian community easily disturbed by queries about witches and murders. Mysterious links were embedded, leading impressionable Blairheads to the "truth" by way of local history and legend. One linked site used Blair Witch power to attract tourists to Burkittsville's real historical landmarks, Spook Hill and battleground. A link from the Burkittsville historical site then led (more than suggestively) to "Witch Myth Project: A Village Possessed," the Discovery Channel's analysis of the Salem Witch Trials. Beyond the education in history offered in this series of links was the point that the Blair Witch phenomenon was a modern witch hysteria with potentially horrifying consequences. [back](#)

[11] "Heather's dedicated apology to the *mothers* of the filmmakers [. . .] echoes a history that resounds in the film because witches were always inimical to children, Heather [. . .] describes herself here as the sacrificial witch, the force who, having destroyed children, now seeks amends with their mothers" (2001, 110). [back](#)

[12] See Rosemary Guiley's *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft* (1999): 288-97. In a dramatization/hypothetical case study in Christiansen's *Häxan*, Marie, a beggar and seamstress, forced to "confess" her affiliation with the Devil and identify her collaborators, names the women who maligned and accused her. By the end of the sequence, all the women are condemned to burn in the same fire. [back](#)

[13] As a double for Elly and Heather, Mary links all three women as weird sisters, practitioners of the occult arts. Heather's journal, included on the Web site and expanded in the *Dossier*, sharpens our sense of this conflation of identities. She has, we learn, been channeling "energy" in Elly's direction "for 2 years now. The time is ripe. Right. Am I. Confidence must be a guiding force. [. . .] It never hurts to play 'the girl' though, either. A balance of good ol' feminine manipulation mixed with maintaining the respect due my position should be an interesting . . ." (Stern 1999: 151). On Page 3, she fights recent "bad Karma" by meditating on the Wiccan Rule of Three, which has influenced the number and the composition of her crew:

# 3 is a number of unity [. . .], *perfection* and *creation*. [. . .] 3 is the # of TOTALITY OF TIME (past, present, future) and of activity (beginning, middle, end). It is the number of the Trinity (Triple Goddess!) and corresponding groupings of 3 of other religions and of the FAMILY. 3 is the basis of magical doctrine, it supposes an intelligent *cause*. . . . (Stern 1999: 152) [back](#)

[14] As per Laura Mulvey's famous theory of the male gaze. [back](#)

[15] The *Dossier* "confirms" the extent to which Heather is "driven" to document—as a means of narcissistic self-verification and, in a worse-case scenario, as a means of survival beyond death. The night after Josh's disappearance, she writes: "Okay. Okay. Okay. Mike and I are Okay. All limbs, bones and eyes in order. I am going to lay down now. Documents. Documenting. Documentation. Verifying existence. That makes sense right. I am verifying that I am still here" (Stern 1999: 165). Ultimately, she succeeds in documenting precisely what she set out to, the Blair Witch experience in all its hystericizing power. [back](#)

[16] Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement have famously extended this argument, suggesting that the sorceress is the hysteric with her fear of/desire to return to the pre-Oedipal Mother and the abject turned inside out; distinctions

between the hysteric (who is witched) and the sorceress (the witch) break down in the general condition of hysteria to which women are supposedly subject. Her lack of a body, moreover, her multivalenced presence and absence, make her transcendent and threatening, for she threatens the ultimate abjection, nothingness. She makes children into herself; she makes them disappear. [back](#)

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