

IN PRAISE OF
The Blair Witch Project

Reality's a great gimmick

Finally, a film that can make a child-like believer out of the most media-saturated cynic.

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

I remember my first time. Clicking through the television channels one night and coming to stop on a night scene, flashing blue and red lights casting sharp shadows on the faces of police officers and bad guys. I wasn't really sure — and I didn't pause long enough to find out — if those were real cops and robbers or not.

To *Serve and Protect*, *Cops* and other true-life police dramas marked the birth of "reality" television, while *America's Funniest Home Videos* exploited video verite for laughs. Then: MTV's *Real Life*, *Jerry Springer*, *Real TV*, and the odd "documentary" like *Alien Autopsy*. All of them cheap to make and audiences have eaten them up. Why not? The more you watch the more you find out how everyone else lives. If you watch long enough, you just might see yourself.

Now along comes a movie that plays on this highly entertaining, highly problematic concept of "reality" viewing, delivering it straight into the multiplexes. The opening title card asks you to believe:

On October 21, 1994, Heather Donahue, Joshua Leonard and Michael Williams hiked into Maryland's Black Hills Forest to shoot a documentary film on a local legend, "The Blair Witch."

They were never heard from again.

One year later, their footage was found.

The found footage, which tells the story of what happened to the three filmmakers, is *The Blair Witch Project*.

Blair Witch, the No. 2 grossing film in North America last weekend, is all critics and movie-goers can talk about. The buzz, begun at the Sundance Festival and built ingeniously via the Net, had me hurrying to the theatre to see it — and ever since moving about how our culture packages and consumes faked reality.

Start with the film's Web site (www.blairwitch.com), which matter-of-factly presents the (just invented) legend of the Blair Witch. The site includes a timeline of events, starting in 1785, in and around the hamlet of Blair; biographical information on the three ill-fated filmmakers; police evidence; interviews with parents an investigators; and clips from television news programs reporting on the disappearance and search for the filmmakers. There are even video and audio clips of the found footage: faked video in support of faked video in order to further the creation of the effect of a thing not faked.

Combine the "facts" reported at the Web site with the program *Curse of the Blair Witch*, a faux investigative report reminiscent of *In Search Of* that aired on the Science Fiction and Space channels two weeks ago, and the myth of the Blair Witch, the ancient and evil creature whose history was being documented by poor Heather, Joshua and Michael, is complete. The actors who play those three, by the way, until recently were unavailable for interviews or appearances. No fools, the folks at Artisan Entertainment, the film's distributor, have been careful to maintain the illusion of the film.

Orson Wells had a radio go at well-faked reality with his infamous *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938. And other movies — *Spinal Tap*, *Waiting For Guffman*, *Hard Core Logo* — have toyed with fictionalizing the documentary format. But *Blair Witch* tran-



Heather Donahue turns the camera on herself for her confession in the movie *The Blair Witch Project*.

sends a boundary that no previous wide-release film has attempted. Described as method filmmaking by co-writers and co-directors Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, the film was shot by the three actors using a hand-held 16mm camera and a High 8 video camera as they wandered through a forest during an eight-day shoot, improvising dialogue based on loose scene descriptions given to them.

The result strikes a lot of people, even in this media-jaded age, as really, really, real. As Myrick told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "We have people e-mailing us and calling to ask if it's true." He tells of a private investigator who caught wind of the story and offered to re-open the search for the three missing filmmakers.

But of course the film isn't the big success it is because everyone is a sucker. No, something more fascinatingly nuanced is going on here. The marketing and presentation of the film allows you to buy in at whatever level suits your gullibility quotient. Some viewers, for example, may be well aware that the movie was constructed by a team of writers, directors and producers — and still believe in the story. Others don't believe the story, but they believe the story is at least a real myth, a folk tale of old like the legends of Nessie and Sasquatch. Still others see it as I do: a clever construct all the way through, but clever enough to cause me to submit to its agenda at least while I'm rapt before the screen.

As such, *Blair Witch* does much more than simply blur the distinction between reality and fantasy. It heralds a shift in how we watch. Over the nearly 100 years that we've had movies and the

half century that we've had television, our relationship with the screen has evolved. Once upon a time kids would spend Saturdays at the movies, hanging on the edge of their seats, gazing up with envy at the improbable heroes and their impossible adventures. Those kids knew what they were watching was fantasy, but couldn't help but obey the fresh pull of the medium, and they got lost in the magic of the movie theatre. They found it natural to suspended disbelief and allow themselves to believe that what they were watching was real.

Few of us can do that anymore. And so we prefer programs that, if they can't show real life, real people, real conflict, at least artfully simulate common methods of presenting reality: the jerky camera movement, the stark clarity of video footage, the randomness of ambient sound.

Believe me, I knew going in that *The Blair Witch Project* was all artifice and not a shred of reality. But for me that proved irrelevant. When I was sitting in the theatre watching the tragedy that befell those three young filmmakers I was at the edge of my seat, gazing up at the screen. The truth didn't matter because in the darkness I — like those earlier generations who were first to feel the power of cinema — wanted to give myself over to the magic. What my media-saturated mind required was some new trick that gave me permission to surrender. *The Blair Witch Project* spoke to me in just that way.

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