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The Blair Witch

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We are *not* lost.... it is very difficult for a person to get lost in America nowadays" screams Heather Donohoe in the shock hit of the year, *The Blair Witch Project*. Not since Quentin Tarantino made the leap from the independent sector into the Hollywood mainstream with *Reservoir Dogs* in 1991 has a film come from obscurity to triumph over major studio productions. The irony of *The Blair Witch Project's* success is inescapable: in a year which was to be dominated by a "Phantom Menace" it has been a ghostly phantom - something vaguely defined as the "Blair Witch" - which has been causing *such* a menace to box office returns on studio investments.

Much has been made of the films clever marketing upon the Internet, (where the makers claimed the documentary was real) but the significance of the films success lies with what Heather Donohoe claims about being "lost" in America today. The central protagonist in the film is ultimately the woods itself and the experience of watching the film provides the spectator with an obstructed view, persistently blinded to events unfolding by the home movie aesthetic and the trees themselves. This emphasis on landscape is reminiscent of the classical Hollywood western where the background becomes not merely a context for the unfolding of narrative but contain specific ideological significance.

I would suggest, therefore, that *The Blair Witch Project* be studied as a 90's representation of the American idea of "The Frontier" showing that, for all the gains made in 1990's technology, the primitive discourses of survival in a wilderness environment - evident in the Western - are on display again.

The 1990's has witnessed something of a renaissance in the American horror film. It was Wes Craven who initiated the recent trend with the post-modern *Scream* and *Scream 2*, followed by others which varied both in quality and success at the box office such as *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and *Urban Legend*. Not since the 1970's has American horror seemed to appeal so much and, as a genre worthy of scholarly attention, the film critic Robin Wood argued that analysis of the 70's batch of films yielded crucial insights into both ideological and social trends of that particular decade. Defined as "The End of American Exceptionalism", 70's horror engaged with a cultural terrain which was feeling the effects of a failed war in Vietnam, civil disorder and political scandal with the Watergate affair; America, it was perceived, was having its own nightmare.

Wood posited the theory that the monster in the horror genre embodied "all that which society represses". Working from a Marxist position "all that which a society represses" related primarily to those features (social, political, sexual, racial) which do not fit into bourgeoisie capitalist America. He argues that repression is the key to understanding the workings of the modern American state in that, to function, a line must be drawn between what is included in the nation and which is not. Hollywood has presented the ideological norms of the nation in the Twentieth Century which include white, heterosexual, nuclear families living in small towns - such as Bedford Falls in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Wood suggests that the monsters of the 70's are the deviations from these norms, thus *The Exorcist* contains possessed children, whilst the genre also articulate excessive female sexuality and dangerous ethnic groupings from "other" cultures.

Though some 20 years on from the subject of his enquiry, and the Marxist position challenged, his paradigm is still useful as an insight into studying *The Blair Witch Project*. It is the dark history of Burkitsville, Maryland, where children went missing in the woods decades earlier that returns, seeking, just as David Lynch has done in his body of work, to scratch the surface veneer of small town America and see what lies beneath.

Through *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, Lynch has deconstructed the notion of small town America as the repository of the nation. Raised in the 1950's, Lynch himself speaks of the perfect surface of his upbringing in Montana as a pastoral version of the American Dream where models for family living were provided in the widening sphere of consumerism. Lynch's work seeks to look beyond the white picket fences kitchen and homemade apple pie adverts and ask the deeper questions, such as what happens to the fabric of the nation if these norms are transgressed? His answers have been disturbing and controversial, noticeably in the phenomenally successful *Twin Peaks*, which presented itself as a murder mystery but went on to tell a tale of incest, rape and murder. To this end, the forthcoming *American Beauty* - an exploration of desires which lie outwith the nuclear family - continues this thematic concern, whilst *The Truman Show* self-referentially addressed the relation between American small towns and consumerism, where everything in the "show" was available to buy through mail order.

I would suggest, therefore, that included in Wood's list of repressed aspects of society should be the frontier mythology, and the larger contradiction of individualism versus the community. Much of historical investigation into the West has shown how the pioneering and individualist spirit which settled the frontier in the first place stood in opposition in later attempts to replace it with order and install community.

This ideological dilemma of the individual versus the community is in evidence in John Ford's *The Searchers*. The final image of the film shows John Wayne having a symbolic house door, which represents the familial unit, closing on him, condemning him to roam the frontier. Ideologically, this scene is both problematic and disturbing. If Wayne has been the archetypal Western hero in Hollywood, then the fact that the ideals which he embodies can not be contained raises the issue question of where does such a violent, individualistic spirit go when they hit the edge of California and have no frontier left to roam?

In the initial media discourses of the Vietnam war, metaphors of the frontier and the pioneering spirit were employed in the coverage of the conflict. Once this was gone however, the spirit headed for the towns and cities of urban America, in whose name they had been fighting, to be met with hostility and consigned to a low social standing. In response to this, many films of the 70's had as their central protagonists returning Vietnam veterans, notably Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver*. American society, in the post Vietnam era, now wanted to "repress" this aspect of its recent past - its failure in south east Asia - and, with the rise of new western historians, the westward expansion, which was now shown to have taken a heavy toll on native American Indian life and culture. The horror genre, and in particular the role of the "monster", is crucial for it can provide a site of transgression from ideological norms, a discursive space where social taboos can be articulated.

Through *The Searchers*, *Jaws*, *Thelma and Louise*, space epics including *Alien*, Hollywood and American identity have had a fascination with the idea of the frontier. *The Blair Witch Project*, in view of its success and popularity with young people, should be studied closely as another representation of this crucial issue in American studies. What makes *The Blair Witch Project* important is the fact that the monster, the repressed aspect of small town Burkittsville, Maryland, never gets destroyed nor even disclosed to the audience. This, therefore, shifts the boundaries of Woods paradigm and places the construction of the monster into the hands of the audience. Each viewer can then project into the film their deepest fears about what suppressed features lie beneath

the surface veneer of the nation. It is through this process that it is still possible to get "lost" in America today and is testament to a genre that provides an experience of film viewing and an important signaller of contemporary ideological concerns.