

## Supernatural Folklore in the *Blair Witch* Films: New Project, New Proof

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Found footage horror films can be significant examples of folk horror, juxtaposing modern technology with its capture of ancient monsters of folklore. These films frequently combine contemporary anxieties over digital technology (Blake and Aldana Reyes 2016) with more archaic fears such as witches, trolls and demons. Both *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) and its second sequel *Blair Witch* (Adam Wingard, 2016) dramatise the search for proof of supernatural occurrences. Adam Scovell notes that the narrative of *The Blair Witch Project* ‘is quintessential Folk Horror through its use of rurality’. The film ‘basks in its rural/urban divide, where the naive students have completely underestimated both the landscape and the power of its folklore’ (2017: 117). The characters in these films are at once sceptical of the existence of a historical witch haunting the area and yet also open-minded enough to take their modern camera technology and try to capture evidence of a supernatural phenomenon—one rooted in the local folklore of Maryland’s woods.

Developments in camera technology in the years between the production of *The Blair Witch Project* and *Blair Witch* complicate the capturing of proof, and I argue that this leads to different responses from viewers of the two films. While *The Blair Witch Project* and *Blair Witch* share many similarities in their representation of proof, there are notable differences regarding the diegetic technology that the characters have at their disposal. After exploring how an impression of authenticity is created in both films through a modern digital camera aesthetics that has substantively changed in the seventeen years between the release of these two films, I then examine how the folklore established in *The Blair Witch Project* is developed in the distinctive aesthetics of the 2016 sequel.

Both *Blair Witch* films address amateur camera operators' craving to preserve an experience of the world by recording what they see. The films place the camera as a profilmic element at the centre of the characters' searches for proof. The *Blair Witch* films become evidence of what occurred to the characters, as recorded by those who were there. The more extraordinary the events are, the less believable they may be to audiences, and therefore the aesthetic strategies attempt to combat the disbelief of the viewer. The hunt for proof is often difficult, and Joseph Laycock argues that 'to preserve verisimilitude, these films cannot rely on music or lavish special effects and must be extremely subtle in their portrayal of supernatural phenomena' (2011: 14). Both films evince this tendency toward subtlety (although *Blair Witch* is significantly less so than its predecessor) as well as a definite resistance to offering the viewer clear images or audio of the supernatural.

The characters do try very hard, however, to preserve a record of what happens to them in the woods, even keeping their cameras filming as they are in great danger. The human desire to live on in some way beyond death or to prolong life is not new, and the recording technologies that have developed through the twentieth century can be seen as a way of preserving human life in some form beyond death. André Bazin refers to this as the 'mummy complex', whereby the appearance of the human body can be snatched 'from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life' (1945: 195). The characters in the *Blair Witch* films wish to offer whoever finds their footage a representation of the reality of what happened to them, documenting the last moments of their lives in order to preserve their own image. While not referring to the characters in found footage films, Bazin calls this desire a 'primitive need to have the last word in the argument with death by means of the form that endures' (1945: 196). The characters also strive to document the existence of the witch from local folklore who is ostensibly responsible for their deaths. The issue of how much and what quality of footage is enough for proof thus features prominently

in the films. Cynthia Freeland argues that *The Blair Witch Project*'s Heather is 'too insistent on filming every little thing, putting them in danger by lingering too long, trying to capture things she perhaps should not have' (2004: 198). As her camera searches the trees for every hanging stick figure, it becomes clear that she wants to attempt to capture all of them. Heather, the urban dweller, becomes obsessed with the isolated forest, seeing it as what Scovell calls 'the dwelling place for demons and spirits' (2017: 49).

Repeatedly, the protagonists of the *Blair Witch* films state their desire to document everything on camera. Heather explicitly proclaims, 'I gotta get it, I gotta get it all, I want it on sound, I want it on 16, if we can see anything I wanna see it on 16'. Jane Roscoe notes that 'whereas the video camera reveals the private, the film footage provides the public document, the official evidence' (2000: 6). Heather prioritizes the camera's gaze over her own, appearing desperate to get her crew out of the tent when they hear noises in the night. She is the most determined to get everything on tape, filming the rock piles and hanging stick men that suggest that the three filmmakers are being taunted. The use of rocks and sticks is what Scovell might call 'quintessentially Folk Horror; there is not only something coming - something that is unknown and defies quick description - but it is something that is coming *from* the rural landscape' (2017: 49). Matt Hills points out that what Heather films allows for 'cognitive evaluations that the Witch exists and is a threatening force, but it also withholds confirmation of the Witch as a fully or clearly defined object, hence pushing fear emotions back towards affective saturation' (2005: 26). Lisa's determination in *Blair Witch*, on the other hand, is portrayed differently. Her method of ensuring everything is captured is to enlist all of her friends as constant camera operators by giving them wearable cameras. It is perhaps this constant filming and multiplicity of angles that make it inevitable that the witch becomes a more clearly defined object; one brief shot suggests she is like a stick figure, as if she has emerged from the forest, now stretched out of human form and tree-like in appearance. It is

unsurprising that Lisa and her friends capture more proof given their arsenal of camera technology that includes clip-on cameras, a drone and a DSLR camera. While *The Blair Witch Project* is more restrained, then, offering footage that fails to provide concrete proof of the supernatural, there are shots in *Blair Witch* that appear to capture confirmation of supernatural occurrences. *The Blair Witch Project* therefore (despite Heather's aspirations) deals much more than *Blair Witch* with the *failure* of modern technologies to capture indisputable proof of the witch of Burkittsville folklore.

### **Evidence of Darker Ages**

While dramatizing the search for, and yet failing to confirm, proof of the supernatural, the *Blair Witch* films do sometimes reveal images that 'unnerve through a sheer recognisability of darker ages that are beginning to reoccur' (Scovell 2017: 10). Coupled with the realistic shooting style, these fleeting revelations can provoke a greater sense of awe in the audience than if the films were shot using traditional techniques. Citing H. P. Lovecraft, Noël Carroll considers that the attraction of supernatural horror is 'that it provokes a sense of awe which confirms a deep-seated human conviction about the world [. . .] that it contains vast unknown forces' (1990: 162). Even as the Blair Witch remains unseen throughout the first film, she creates awe in the spectator. Indeed, even as she confuses, controls and kills the characters, the Blair Witch is terrifying and awe-inspiring as much because she is unseen as because of the powers she demonstrates. Her ability to isolate the characters in the woods demonstrates what Scovell describes as 'an intellectual awareness of the skewing power of isolating landscapes', which 'can be used to control and manipulate people into doing the most terrible of things' (2017: 28). The power of isolation is explored in the mythology of the Blair Witch with her influence over hermit Rustin Parr and then later, in *Blair Witch*, with her apparent power to influence Lane into trying to kill documentary maker Lisa. When Lane screams at

Lisa, 'You have to do what she tells you', Lane appears to have been hearing voices, just as Rustin Parr once did.

Many of the significant events in *Blair Witch* can be seen as repetitions of what happened to the characters in the original film. There is a visit to a local person who believes they have deeper knowledge of the Blair Witch, the crossing of the creek, and, finally, the reappearance of Rustin Parr's house. Many of these moments accrue significance from the Blair Witch mythology. The woods are where Elly Kedward was banished in 1785. In 1825, eleven witnesses saw a pale woman's hand emerge from the creek to pull a ten-year-old girl in. This is also the site where Ashley cuts her foot, causing a wound that eventually becomes infected and penetrated by a root-like organism. The children's handprints all over the walls of Rustin Parr's house are testament to the presence of children in the house, unnerving the viewer (and the camera operator), who is aware of the stories that Rustin Parr murdered children in his isolated house in the woods. The climax of both films features characters standing in the corner of a room facing the wall, which itself repeats the story that Rustin Parr made a child stand in the corner of the room while he murdered another child. According to locals, the house itself no longer exists, so its presence in both films is evidence of the witch's supernatural power to resurrect this haunted, awe-inspiring building. The capturing of the house on camera confirms that it is not a character's hallucination. The cameras cannot lie. They provide evidence of what exists.

### **Cameras and the Evolving Nature of the Documentary Project**

The *Blair Witch* films play on the viewer's need for proof through means of visual evidence. Carroll's definition of horror 'involves essential reference to an entity, a monster, which then serves as the particular object of the emotion of art-horror' (1990: 41). The feeling of horror is reserved for moments when a horrific object is seen. Most horror films make a point of

proving the existence of the monster through carefully constructed shots that reveal a source of the terror. *The Blair Witch Project*, however, does not offer this definitive proof of the monster. Despite Heather's very clear goal of capturing visual evidence, for instance, the less than ideal shooting conditions are a hindrance to getting any footage at all of the monster. Carolina Gabriela Jauregui argues that 'mankind has forever been obsessed with the need to understand the world through the eyes, with the need for visual evidence' (2004). The characters in the *Blair Witch* films not only display this obsession but also a desire to share what they have seen with others who can in turn see it with their own eyes. They thus embody what Scovell describes as 'Enlightenment figures arrogantly underestimating older ways and their narrative legitimacy' (2017: 118), a description that is particularly relevant to *Blair Witch*. Here, despite knowing the folkloric history of the Blair Witch, and despite James's sister's disappearance, the youths still believe their technology, including drone cameras and GPS cameras, will keep them safe. The technology is foregrounded immediately in the opening titles of *Blair Witch*. The opening titles do not mention the filmmakers, as in *The Blair Witch Project*. The technology used to capture the footage has become more important than those who capture it. Indeed, *Blair Witch* focuses on the 'memory cards and DV tapes' and also insists that the footage was 'assembled' rather than simply being 'found'.

The introductory title cards in both films immediately alert the viewer to an extra-diegetic enunciator who appears to have added these titles in order to offer some context. This suggests an editor, as footage from two cameras is being intercut in 1999 and from up to eight cameras in 2016. *Blair Witch* makes this editing explicit with its reference to the footage being 'assembled'. The lack of reference to the actual filmmakers in *Blair Witch* also highlights that this film has a wider range of camera-carrying characters than just the single group in *The Blair Witch Project*. The use of both memory cards and DV tapes suggests both modern and older cameras, and it could even be hypothesised that there are characters from

diverse economic situations involved. All of this complicates the viewer's hypotheses about the diegetic enunciator in *Blair Witch*.

The role of camera operator is also much more complex in *Blair Witch* (Turner 2019: 87). In *The Blair Witch Project*, Josh is the designated camera operator for Heather's documentary, responsible for getting the black-and-white footage on the 35mm camera that will form the majority (or perhaps all) of Heather's project. Heather has the colour mini-DV camera mostly to collect behind-the-scenes footage apparently for her own amusement. In *Blair Witch*, the role of camera operator is much less delineated due to the number of cameras. Though it is Lisa's documentary, and she has acquired the cameras, the assembled footage that the viewer sees is taken from many different cameras, including that of Lane, who joins the group on their trip into the woods. Only Lane's footage is noticeably different, as his camera takes mini-DV tapes and is therefore of a lower resolution.

Reflecting the quality, affordability, and ubiquity of modern cameras in 2014, there is far less differentiation between the official footage and behind-the-scenes footage in *Blair Witch*. Space on a memory card is not as expensive as 35mm film, and so the cameras in *Blair Witch* appear to be recording constantly. Heather believes 35mm footage to be superior to digital, and, in 1994, this was likely the case. In 2014, Lisa is using all digital because the quality has improved significantly. Only Lane's mini-DV camera suffers in terms of picture quality, but that is not the concern of Lisa and her documentary.

The sense of spontaneity and of watching uncut raw footage is exaggerated in *Blair Witch* in almost every shot. Whereas Heather in *The Blair Witch Project* films at carefully chosen locations such as Burkittsville cemetery and Coffin Rock, the site of historical murders attributed to the witch, Lisa is content to interview James and Peter in James's bedroom, seemingly at unplanned times, such as when James and Peter are in the middle of playing a videogame. In this scene, Lisa can be heard from off-screen calling to Peter as he

plays a videogame in front of her. Whereas Heather gets voxpops with locals, James, not Lisa, enlists locals to show them where they found the mini DV tape that prompted him to believe his sister Heather might still be alive. In one of the very first shots of *Blair Witch*, Lisa is filming and interviewing James when two of their friends enter the room unannounced and Lisa pans the camera around to capture the incoming pair asking, 'What are you guys doing?' Many of the cuts are jump cuts, and, in between scenes, there is often a series of quick cuts of shots that are nonsensical due to their brevity and lack of context. The implication is that digital filmmaking has eroded the discipline of the young filmmakers. It could also be seen as a by-product of the rise of reality television. James is the focus of Lisa's documentary in *Blair Witch*, whereas the Blair Witch herself was the focus of Heather's more ambitious investigative documentary back in 1994. James is the exploited subject of Lisa's more sensationalistic documentary, and Peter even raises his concerns with Lisa about how his best friend James will be represented in the film.

Available technology is also bound up with the precautions the urban characters take before heading into the woods in search of evidence of a witch. In *Blair Witch*, there are more scenes dedicated to explaining the technology that will prevent them from getting lost than in *The Blair Witch Project*, perhaps to be expected as there is more technology to introduce, both to the characters and to the audience. In the earlier film, the camera technology is relatively simple, and the diegetic filmmakers rely only on a map and a compass. On the other hand, in *Blair Witch*, due to the number of cameras, the different types, and the number of characters that will be using them, showing and explaining the cameras occupy a significant number of the early scenes. James, Peter and Ashley are all shown how to use an ear-piece camera by Lisa. Lisa also demonstrates the drone camera to the entire group, using her phone to guide it. The walkie talkies are also tested on camera, and the built-in GPS of these gadgets is frequently referenced. All of this technology is designed to render the

landscape less ‘alien in comparison to the everyday bustle of the urban’ (Scovell 2017: 38). The on-camera demonstration of this technology provides proof that the characters in *Blair Witch* took more precautions than their predecessors, but their modern technology is still no match for the witch and her power over the woods.

### **Technology and Incomplete Proof of the Supernatural**

Both still and moving image photography have become essential tools in proving things to be true. Unlike paintings, drawings and other means of representing people and places visually, photography demands that there is a reality to be captured in the first place. A sketch can be conjured from imagination or memory, but footage demands that there be something in front of the camera. Maya Deren contends that ‘since a specific reality is the prior condition of the existence of a photograph, the photograph not only testifies to the existence of that reality (just as drawing testifies to the existence of an artist) but is, to all intents and purposes, its equivalent’ (1974: 219). Twenty years later, Gregory Currie argues that ‘just as one can see only that which exists, there can be photographs only of things that exist’ (1995: 75). In the age of computer-generated effects, this statement may still be partly true, but it is more complicated now that films include realistic photographic images of things that actually do not exist. Laycock believes that ‘skeptics watching “found footage” of people being stalked by supernatural beings may experience [. . .] cognitive dissonance. We know the footage cannot be real and yet it seems plausible that [it] is real’ (2011: 15). This is a fundamental point for understanding the way audiences respond to and interpret *Blair Witch*. The incongruity between the cinematography—the apparent transparency of the footage—and the supernatural elements that are purportedly being represented is what lends *Blair Witch* much of its allure.

The sense of authenticity and transparency in the cinematography of *Blair Witch* is aided by the use of a very modern range of cameras. Despite modern camera developments, however, the *Blair Witch* films are particularly adept at ensuring that only partial views of anything uncanny or horrific are shown. Rebecca Coyle argues that ‘digicam films recognise the partial nature of documentation’ (2010: 235) and points to sound as being increasingly important. These films demonstrate that even with access to modern recording technology, there is still inevitably a fragmented mediation when trying to film an event or object. Coyle goes on to suggest that ‘digicam films highlight the partial nature of reality and seemingly random access to information; characters express distress over not knowing what is going on, why events are occurring and how they were caused’ (2010: 235). This distress and lack of knowledge can be partially shared with the viewers, as they are limited to seeing only what the often terrified character captures. The camera shakes, and the framing and focus is often poor, but while this may frustrate some viewers, Scott Dixon McDowell argues that ‘the implication that there is something just off camera moving too quickly for the camera operator to catch is very strong’ (2001: 141). Furthermore, Andrew Schopp argues that ‘the hyperrealism of the handheld camera mocks the film’s audience, gives that audience excessive immediacy but obscured vision, and thereby suggests a disturbing relationship between immediacy and obscurity’ (2004: 137). The camera captures plenty in its frame, but frequently the source of the horror remains either barely glimpsed or completely unseen. Sarah Lynn Higley and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock contend that this ‘engages the viewer’s imagination and provokes an affective response’ (2004: 18). The *Blair Witch* films feature characters with the opportunity to capture first-hand experiences of terrifying situations, then—but, instead of audiences getting a privileged viewpoint, the viewer has to use their imagination almost constantly.

The viewer of *Blair Witch*, however, requires less imagination than the viewer of *The Blair Witch Project*. In *Blair Witch*, the photographically real locations and characters combine with some brief computer-generated fakery to make a convincing whole that nevertheless fails to deliver certainty. There are glimpses of what is perhaps the witch, but these are fleeting and ambiguous. Some things that quite visibly happen to the characters also strongly suggest a powerful supernatural presence—for example, a tent flying into the air or a character essentially being snapped in half. These moments feature a combination of practical and digital effects and are much more obvious than anything in *The Blair Witch Project*. While the characters in *Blair Witch* render the monstrous witch in her elongated tree-like form more believable because of the way Lisa captures her presence with her camcorder, the film also uses uncertain and hectic camerawork to blur the boundaries of real and fake. J. P. Telotte notes that ‘while the camera is a device that appears to let us capture the real [...] it also constrains our experience by restricting what we can see’ (2004: 47). Poor framing, frantic camerawork, dark lighting and audio that is drowned out by screams give the spectator only the briefest glimpses of the monster. Furthermore, Telotte also argues that ‘by funneling our relation to the natural world, even to one another, through the technological, the narrative evokes our own sense of being lost in the mediated world’ (p.48). The intention is for the audience to get lost in the *Blair Witch* films; unsure of what is real, fake, fictional or true.

The viewer is invited to read the films partly as planned documentaries and partly spontaneous home videos; this encourages the audience toward what Don Tresca calls a ‘documentary mode of engagement’. With the introduction of the fantastical witch, however, ‘these films counteract the notion that everything (or really anything) in “reality” can be captured by video image’ (2011: 45). Like all mockumentaries, found footage films force the viewer to question the authenticity of all documentary by imitating a reality that cannot rationally exist. *The Blair Witch Project* fails to offer the definitive proof of the supernatural

that the characters are looking for, and so both characters and audience have their understanding restricted despite the tools available to capture 'reality'. Tresca states that "reality" is too all-encompassing to fit into the small frame of the camera lens. "Reality" is happening all around the filmmakers, and it is impossible to capture it all (or even a small part of it)' (2011: 45). For the camera-operating characters, not even the photographic moving image camera can capture all that they wish to record, and the spectator is left with only a partial view (and understanding) of what is occurring. The *Blair Witch* films make photography problematic, turning the camera into a flawed tool that can frustrate viewers as much as it can reveal proof and provide answers. Indeed, Tresca believes that 'the camera, instead of becoming an instrument of knowledge and protection, becomes an instrument of destruction and death' (2011: 46) to the characters, who wield the cameras carelessly and with too much faith in their representational capabilities. At the climax of *Blair Witch* for example, Lisa believes that the camera can protect her from the witch, but capturing the witch on camera does not save her and, once again, the camera fails to capture proof of exactly what happens to either James or Lisa, the last survivors of the film.

The drive to prove the existence of the witch of Burkittsville folklore is essential for the camera-operating characters in the *Blair Witch* films. In each film, the characters use the cameras to attempt to document mysterious events. Proving the existence of the witch, even with the aid of digital technology, is nigh on impossible, however, although developments in camera technology (smaller, wearable cameras) by the time of *Blair Witch* make capturing proof slightly more likely. While the viewer may not be tricked into believing that what they are watching is a genuine recording of extraordinary events, the combination of what is seen and how it is filmed nonetheless lends the films a sense of credibility not often afforded to such unbelievable stories. But not only is proof of the supernatural patchy, with half-

glimpsed images such as in *Blair Witch*, but, in *The Blair Witch Project*, the fact that nothing supernatural is caught on camera at all makes the footage quite frustrating for the viewer. In the end, folklore remains precisely that: stories told by word of mouth. The footage does not prove that the witch of Burkittsville definitely exists, and therefore it will likely only provoke more people to pass on the stories orally.

The *Blair Witch* films do not settle the existence of the supernatural, then. They do, though, offer the viewer recorded documents of what traditional folk horror scenarios could look like if someone involved had a camera. Like the characters in the films, the viewer is also likely to believe something if it seems to have been caught on camera. The characters' desperation to film what they are seeing and experiencing is due to their belief that any viewer will trust the veracity of the footage. In this way, the characters and their cameras strive to convince the audience that the folklore of local legend is true. However, the diegetic filmmakers have underestimated not only the power of the witch over the woods she haunts but also their own ability to use their urban technology to master, capture and survive. The witch preserves her control over the woods—and this is all the characters' cameras finally prove.

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