

THE INVISIBLE MONSTROUS-FEMININE:
THE BLAIR WITCH AND HER HETEROTOPIC WOODS

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In

Cinema

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Erez Genish

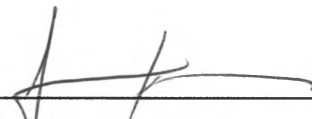
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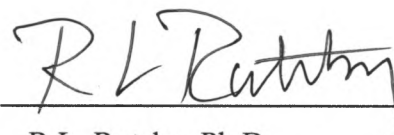
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *The Invisible Monstrous-Feminine: The Blair Witch and her Heterotopic Woods* by Erez Genish, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Cinema at San Francisco State University.



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THE INVISIBLE MONSTROUS-FEMININE:
THE BLAIR WITCH AND HER HETEROTOPIC WOODS

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San Francisco, California
2015

What is absent in the pseudo found-footage film of Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), is the visual depiction of the Blair witch. The nontraditional tactic of leaving the witch in the woods without form stands in contrast to other folklore and fairytales that perpetuated the mythic figure of the crone, an old woman whose decaying body represents the blurred line between life and death. The crone- witch corresponds to Barbara Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine and her analysis of Julia Kristeva's abject. As her polluted, filthy old mark her a phobic referent, the crone-witch becomes the non-object that draws the subject to the regenerative womb. However, what draws a parallel in the *BWP* between the monstrous-feminine crone and abjection is the witch's invisibility. Her woods, in fact, share an affinity to what Michel Foucault calls heterotopias, which are counter-sites, adjacent to real spaces, but are outside of all places. As heterotopias mark the virtual point between the real standpoint of the subject and the non-real space, the geographical woods are represented as the virtual gate between the real woods and the invisible ones. As she eludes the cameras of the characters and their effort to submit her to the controlling documentary gaze, the Blair Witch maneuvers between both spaces, never relinquishes her commanding visual perspective and subsumes the students in her abject realm.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis



Chair, Thesis Committee

MAY 19, 2015

Date

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Introduction

The novelty of Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick's American independent horror film, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), does not necessarily lie in its appropriation of documentary aesthetics, but in its invisible female witch. This tactic allowed the filmmakers to leave the witch as an entity without form, and approaches the economy of abjection—the abject being a non-object. One of the highest-grossing pseudo found footage movies of all times it is a fictional documentary revolving around three film students and their journey to the Black Hills Forest of Maryland in 1994 to make a documentary on the myth of the Blair Witch. The students perished and never returned from the woods, but the police discovered their footage a year later, and what they found in the footage was the perilous rendezvous of the three young filmmakers and their encounter with the supernatural forces that haunt the woods. What the footage, however, withholds from its audience is the visual depiction of the entity responsible for the violence visited upon the students. The town locals attribute these evil deeds to a female spirit. Known as the Blair Witch, the spirit of Elly is a ghost who supposedly manages to elude the cameras of the three students and follows them throughout their entire deathly voyage in the woods.

This nontraditional depiction of an invisible witch stands in contrast to countless folk tales and fairy tales featuring a female entity in her physical form, who—framed by patriarchal discourse—targets the civilized man and his community from her dwelling in

the woods. Affiliated with nature and supernatural wonders, the witch in the woods has evolved from the mythic figure of the crone, the third aspect of the Triple Goddess, whose aged and decaying body resembles an entity between life and death, and whose working place is located within the regenerative womb, where she recycles matter and energy.¹ We can draw a parallel between the crone and the witch from the forest because they are both represented in folkloric texts as an old monstrous-female figure whose physical characteristics and supernatural powers correspond to the cycle of life—death and rejuvenation.

The link that Barbara Creed draws between the monstrous-feminine and Julia Kristeva's analysis of the abject correlates with the physical shape of the witch-crone and her habitat. The abject, which is neither an object nor a thing, is the place where "meaning collapses," as it draws the subject back to the violent split from the maternal body.² Similarly the witch typically "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. ... Irrational, scheming, evil—these are the words used to define

¹ Deanna J. Conway, *Maiden, Mother, Crone: The Myth & Reality of the Triple Goddess* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2001), Kindle Edition, 64-886.

² Julia Kristeva, *Power of Horror: an essay on abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

the witch.”³ The monstrous-feminine, according to Creed, has been marked in various horror texts as a loathsome female whose polluted and filthy body becomes a source of abjection. In Dario Argento’s witch trilogy, *The Three Mothers*, for instance, although placed in an urban setting the witches live “in a house where she hides her ‘filthy secrets’ in dark secret places which suggests the ‘evil womb’ of the abject mother.”⁴

Accordingly, the myth of the witch in the woods depicts an aged and loathsome crone whose body, similar to the corpse, marks the liminal phase between life and death. Folklores and fairytales such as the Slavic Baba Yaga, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Jorinde and Joringel*, *The Old Woman in the Forest*, and others, concentrate on an unsightly old woman whose depiction as a cannibalistic monster or as a wicked elderly woman marks her as an aged monstrous-feminine who upsets the symbolic order.

The absence of the Blair Witch on-screen seemingly challenges her connection with the monstrous-feminine crone, but her power to remain invisible is enhanced with the strategic marketing of the filmmakers to promote the myth through its documentary style, fabricated interviews and an internet website. The witch, even in the marketing campaign, is absent and this further helps to signify the Blair Witch as abject—she is literally set outside of discourse and in her non-presence figures as the monstrous-feminine crone. In that regard, her physical form is irrelevant to the theme of the film,

³ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 76.

⁴ *Ibid*, 77.

which is less concerned with the witch herself as a character, but rather engaged in engendering a representation of a female spirit to be feared—unbound, nowhere and everywhere.

As the cameras of the students lack the capacity to detect her, it is not clear, however, where the monstrous-feminine crone resides if her physical figure is absent from the woods of Maryland. The Black Hill Forest in the film is perhaps what Michel Foucault calls heteritopias, which are real places, “which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia,” and they are located over the virtual point. “Places of this kind,” he adds, “are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.”⁵ The woods of the Blair witch has an affinity to heterotopias not just because they are adjacent to other real sites such as the town, but also based on the ability of the witch to be everywhere, to effortlessly maneuver between spaces, and yet, to remain invisible.

The voyage of the students in the woods does not take place in the invisible realm of the witch, but near the virtual point of the mirror, where the subject moves from the real stand point and crosses into the “unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface.” Foucault explains that when the subject gazes at the mirror, the reflection is “a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there

⁵ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* vol. 16, no. 1 (spring 1986): 24.

where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror.”⁶ In the film, the students are geographically close to the “utopian” habitat of the witch, and still, similar to the case of the mirror, they are absent from her realm of her invisibility.

Since the woods of Blair Witch are not an homogeneous space, what the students find in that virtual point is the abject attributed to the monstrous feminine, but for the witch, it is a the point where she crosses into her utopian realm and where she can exercises her powers. One of her powers is to keep her realm locked for outsiders, and by that, she assumes the role of the guard of the panopticon. The most significant invention of this modern prison, as Foucault explains, is to keep the prisoners visible at all times.⁷

As the Blair Witch is able to see the students but to remain unseen, she in fact holds the keys to a gate of the woods (not the woods in the film digesis, but her invisible woods) from which the subject can cross into the realm of invisibility. Those who dare to come near her dwelling place are eventually dragged inside, but what they find there is pure abjection.

What the *BWP* demonstrates then is that the abject of the monstrous-feminine, and in this case the witch-crone, does not lie in the defilement that her body elicits, as Creed argues, but in her power to regulate the virtual point of her heterotopic realm and

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Michel Foucault, "Panopticism from Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison," *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Context*, Vol. 2, No. 1, *The Dynamics of Race and Incarceration: Social Integration, Social Welfare, and Social Control* (Autumn, 2008): 5.

transforms it for the visitors into the place where “meaning collapses.” When the cameras of the students come near the virtual point of the witch’s mirror, all they can see is the darkness of abyss, where they lose their verbal and visual rhetoric. Once their cameras stop recording, the students join the witch in her realm of invisibility. What is terrifying about the legend of the Blair witch then is that her woods mark the termination of the subject and the end of visibility.

The Abjection Monstrous-Feminine Crone

The character of the contemporary witch, including the Elly Blair witch, draws on a long tradition of witch narratives. In primitive societies, the power of women to give birth and menstruate “was no less a marvel than the universe itself,” and because of this close affinity with the natural world, women were thought to be the sole owners of supernatural powers.⁸ In the world of Pagan spirituality, ancient cultures associated fertility and motherhood, and with unexplained natural phenomena. The phases of the lunar calendar is associated with the Moon Deities, the Moon Goddess, or the Triple Moon Goddess. The Triple Goddess marked the three primary stages in human life: “youth and puberty, parenthood and maturity, old age and wisdom.”⁹

The three faces of the Triple Goddess are known as the Maiden, the Mother, and the Crone. Whereas the Maiden represented “the youthfulness and anticipation of life, the

⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1960), 315.

⁹ Conway, Kindle Edition, 64-65.

matrix of creation which will, when the time is ripe, [re]produce,”¹⁰ this is the mother of the trinity, who exhibits “physical desire, mental will, and spiritual love that go together to create endlessly on many levels.”¹¹ The crone, however, the third aspect of the Triple Goddess, was seen as an intimidating violent figure that represents the decay of the body and the end of a life cycle.¹²

The crone, associated with the underworld, was provided with various names such as the Old Woman, the Dark Mother, and Hag.¹³ What is unique about the Dark mother, as opposed to the nurturing mother, is that she was no longer able to reproduce once “menopause was completed,”¹⁴ and as a result, her social function drastically changed. She was seen as an experienced wise old woman, also known as the grandmother, who simultaneously embodied the blurred line between life and death. In ancient cultures, she was a spiritual guidance in ceremonies of birth and death,¹⁵ and in the folklore as the crone, an old woman who possessed dark magic.

¹⁰ Ibid, 81-82

¹¹ Ibid, 83

¹² Ibid, 84-87.

¹³ Ibid, 883-886.

¹⁴ Dorothy Becvar, “Tracking the Archetype of the Wise Woman/Crone,” *ReVision* 28, no. 1 (2005): 20.

¹⁵ Henrietta Bernstein and Victoria Ransom, *The crone oracles: Initiate's guide to the ancient mysteries* (York Beach, ME: Red Wheel Weiser, 1994), 127.

One of the most notable crones is the Greek Hecate of the Amazon, "the oldest Greek form of the triform Goddess, who ruled heaven, the underworld, and the Earth."¹⁶ Another crone from the Greek mythology is Circe the crone moon goddess, called by Homer "a witch who turned men into swine"; she was the goddess of vendetta, love, and dark magic as she poisoned her husband, the king of the Sarmatians.¹⁷ The crone has inspired other tales and evolved into various figures in literature. In some manifestations of crone folklore, she is not necessarily presented as a wicked woman, but in fact as a helpful teacher with magical powers. In Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, the crone shares her wisdom with the hero, bestowing on him magic to assist him in his journey,¹⁸ and in Brothers Grimm's tale, *The Robber Bridegroom*, the old lady in a cellar kitchen in the woods warns women and rescues them from the hands of the cannibalistic Robber Bridegroom and his band.¹⁹

Nevertheless, many other manifestations of the crone fuel the character of the witch as a notorious hag with a cannibalistic appetite, or with destructive magic powers. The Slavic folklore of the Baba Yaga depicts an unsightly old woman who constantly

¹⁶ Conway, Kindle Edition, 992-993.

¹⁷ Ibid, 972-975

¹⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 57.

¹⁹ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "The Robber Bridegroom," in *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, ed. And trans. Jack Zipes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 135-137.

searches for human flesh and craves small children in particular.²⁰ The witch in *Hansel and Gretel* is afflicted with a similar obsession as she fattens skinny Hansel up for the purpose of devouring him later.²¹ In other tales, the crone abuses her magical powers to wreak havoc on the so-called civilized man. In another tale of the Brothers Grimm, *The Old Woman in the Forest*, a young female servant liberates the prince from the wicked witch in the cabin, who turned him into a tree,²² and in *Jorinde and Joringel*, any young man who comes near the witch's castle in the gloomy woods becomes "quite fixed, and could not move a step till she came and set him free."²³ In the Norse mythology, Thomas Bulfinch depicts crone Elli as a toothless old woman, who brings Thor down on his knees and defeats him during his visit to Jotunheim.²⁴

However, the common ground of all those tales is the portrayal of the crone figure as a female witch whose attributes evoke a liminal character—in-between life and death. While Baba Yaga and the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* feed on human flesh, the witches of *The Old Woman in the Forest* and *Jorinde and Joringel* turn young men into objects—placing them in a zone in-between, where they are neither alive nor dead. Also, Crone

²⁰ Brian Cooper, "Baba-Yaga, the Bony-Legged: A Short Note on the Witch and Her Name," *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* (1997): 83.

²¹ Grimm, "Hansel and Gretel," 43-49.

²² Grimm, "The Old Woman in the Forest," 401-403.

²³ Ibid, "Jorinde and Joringel," 227-230.

²⁴ Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Mythology: The Age of Fable, or Stories of Gods and Heroes* (West Valley City: Waking Lion Press, 2006), 371-378.

Elli is perhaps stronger than Thor, but her missing teeth and haggard appearance indicate her aging.

The crone finds affinities with Barbara Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine and her interpretation of Julia Kristeva's abject. In her essay, Kristeva explains that the abject is not an identified "thing," nor is it the "thing" recognized as the monster. It is menacing because it is "radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses."²⁵ She argues that "these body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border."²⁶ The abject is the moment where meaning collapses as it reminds the subject the clumsy separation of the fetus from the maternal. According to Creed, "Virtually all horror texts represent the monstrous-feminine in relation to Kristeva's notion of maternal authority and the mapping of the self's clean and proper body. Images of blood, vomit, pus, shit, etc., are central to our culturally/socially constructed notions of the horrific."²⁷

The character of the witch assimilates the folkloric image of the crone: in her haggard appearance, her destructive magic, associations with the marvels of the natural world, and filthiness and defilement. The aged body of the crone and its physical qualities

²⁵ Kristeva, 2.

²⁶ Ibid, 3.

²⁷ Creed, 13.

have a close affinity to an age-withered body; a body that seems to have been around for forever. She represents an eternal entity that produces paranormal magic extracted from chaos, “the universe of formless recycled energy and matter,” that is also known as “the Regenerative Womb, the Darkness of the Abyss, the Ocean of Blood.”²⁸ What the crone engenders, in other words, is a result of recycling waste that are typically rejected (abjected). If she draws her strength from the regenerative maternal womb, and the crone is also known as Chaos, she by stands in opposition to every thing that the Symbolic aims to disavow: she is by definition abject: “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”²⁹

As already mentioned, examples of the crone in folklore include the Greek Hecate whose one of her statues shows her with “three heads and six arms, or merely as a pillar called a Hecterion.”³⁰ Baba Yaga, similarly, has an unpleasant appearance with breasts reaching below her waist and bones sticking out of her body.³¹ Concerning the cannibalistic hag, such as the case of the witch in the woods of *Hansel and Gretel* and Baba Yaga, she defies the prohibition on cannibalism. Since “abjection (of the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother,”³² the cannibalistic act of the witch transgresses a taboo that is vital for the symbolic order to

²⁸ Conway, Kindle Edition, 912-913

²⁹ Kristeva, 4

³⁰ Conway, Kindle Edition, 999.

³¹ Cooper, 83.

³² Kristeva, 79.

break free from the moment of abjection. As she permits her body to become a place of pollution, she in fact violates the clean and proper body.

The monstrous-feminine crone clings to the abject after she goes through the transformation from motherhood into the elderly figure. In many of the folkloric manifestations, the hag in the woods develops an obsession and sometimes an appetite for children, as their young age mark them as full of vitality. As they thrive, she decays, and as they are welcomed into the symbolic order, she is expelled. In her affiliation with abjection she is always already in opposition to the Symbolic and, in the form of her powers, threatens the Symbolic. The victim's confrontation with the witch necessitates a negotiation of the abject and a re-affirmation of the Symbolic order. Once Hansel and Gretel make the first step into the cabin of the witch, they metaphorically enter the penetrable but isolated womb of the witch. When the witch locks Hansel in the uterine cage and threatens to devour him, she is "associated with the dread of the generative mother seen only as the abyss, the all-incorporating black hole which threatens to reabsorb what it once birthed."³³ It is up to Gretel (the "proper woman" so to speak) that severs the bond, freeing herself and her brother's body from the abject mother that refuses to let go.

³³ Creed, 27.

The Strange Case of Witch Elly

One of the most familiar manifestations of the crone, as mentioned earlier, is the witch who resides in the woods. Folklore and fairy tales such as *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Old Woman in the Forest*, *Jorinde and Joringel*, and many others revolve around a monstrous-feminine aged crone who executes her maleficent scheme in a realm coded as “uncivilized”—civilization being bound by fences, marked with architectural features—are set in counter-distinction with the boundless forest and those that inhabit it.

The myth of the witch and her dwelling place has been adapted in cinema in a variety of ways. The cinematic witch typically poses a threat to the peaceful communities or towns located adjacent to the woods. In Len Talan’s cinematic version of Grimm’s *Hansel and Gretel* (1987), Witch Griselda (Cloris Leachman) has the same malicious intentions as in the original tale. In the horror-comedy of Tommy Wirkola’s *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters* (2008), the vengeful adult siblings (Jeremy Renner as Hansel and Gemma Arterton as Gretel) re-experience their traumatic time in the woods after a group of witches attack the town of Augsburg and abduct twelve children to sacrifice them in the forest. In Rob Marshall’s musical-fantasy *Into the Woods* (2014), based on the Broadway musical, a Baker (James Corden) and his wife (Emily Blunt) attempt to lift the curse the witch in the woods (Meryl Streep) cast on their family tree.

The Blair Witch Project, on the other hand, is a distinctive piece whose cinematic attributes challenge other cinematic versions of the witch-in-the-woods myth. In addition

to its documentary style, what makes this pseudo found-footage film unique is the invisibility of the Blair witch's body. At first sight, it might seem impossible to draw any parallels between her and the monstrous-feminine crone as the Blair witch's body remains off-screen throughout the entire movie, but in fact her absence reinforces the linkage between her and abjection.

The film follows the story of three film students, Heather (Heather Donahue), Michael (Michael C. Williams) and Joshua (Joshua Leonard), as they make a documentary on Elly Kedward, also known as the Blair Witch from Burkittsville, formerly Blair, Maryland. As the three students start to interview the town locals, they are acquainted from the beginning with an unverified story from the 1940s about Rustin Parr, a local man who allegedly kidnapped seven children and murdered them in a cabin in the woods. According to his testimony, it was the spirit of Witch Elly who haunted and forced him to execute the crime.

Motivated by the horrific tales of the locals, the students set off on their journey and hike to Coffin Rock, where eyewitnesses found the tortured bodies of five innocent men after they were crudely butchered in a ritualistic ceremony. As they set up their camp at night, they start hearing crackling noises and cries of children in the distance; they find voodoo sticks outside their tent in the morning, and even find themselves fleeing from their tent after a mysterious force shakes it in the middle of the night. Their

endeavor to find a way back to the town is in vain once they realize that they have been hiking in circles.

Their despair reaches a climax when Josh goes missing the following morning, presumed to be kidnapped. During their search, Heather and Michael discover the notorious old cabin of the witch, the location where Rustin Parr allegedly took seven children in 1940s. The screams from inside the cabin prompt Heather and Mike to storm in, where they split up and lose each other's sight after a brief moment. Holding up the camera, panting and panic-stricken, Heather leads the audience into the basement where Mike stands with his face against the wall, and without warning, her camera drops to the ground and her screams abruptly stop. As the 16mm camera lies on its side, the film jitters, and the viewers receive a static blurred image of the walls and the floor.

What the filmmakers did to validate the existence of the invisible witch and convince the audience that the Blair witch myth was authentic was to set up an official website on the Internet with found-footage scenes from the film, advertised false reports and presented fake pictures from the scene. One of the pictures, for instance, showed an image of Josh's car that the police had supposedly found on Black Rock Road in 1994.³⁴ In addition, they established the Blair Witch Wiki website (aka Wikia) designated to elaborate on the history and the legend of the Blair Witch.

³⁴ <http://www.blairwitch.com/>

Wikia details the biography of Elly Kedward, an Irish woman who allegedly lived between 1729 and 1785 and was accused of practicing witchcraft and Catholicism. Even though the website criticizes the Protestant town locals for their far-fetched imagination, it also establishes affinities between Elly and the abject crone, noting that even after the locals had taken her blindfolded to the woods, tied her to a tree and tortured her for days, sending their dogs to tear her flesh, “they saw she had survived every form of human torture which she could undergo,” so they finally “left her hanging by her neck in the branches of her execution tree.”³⁵ The notion that her body was old but survived this brutal affliction connects her to the old but immortal figure of the crone as it situates her in this transitional stage between life and death; she manages to stay alive after such a brutal torture despite her old and weak body.

Another component that supposedly verifies the existence of the Blair Witch is the testimony of Mary Brown, a mentally disordered woman and the only living witness to survive after confronting Elly’s spirit in her physical manifestation. Brown describes the Blair Witch: “It was like a woman! Only on her arms and on her hands it was like ... hair. It was real dark almost black hair. Almost like a horse.” The portrayal of the witch as an old spirit who has haunted the town locals at least since the 1940s suggests a certain monstrosity (a being straddling life and death), and is amplified further by the animalistic characterization of her body.

³⁵ http://blairwitch.wikia.com/wiki/Elly_Kedward

While Brown and the paratextual accounts of the witch, offer the most powerful tactic to validate the existence of the invisible witch, in the end it is the documentary style of the *BWP* that makes the witch truly horrifying. Before the film shows any footage, it starts with a brief introduction:

In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found.

The use of found-footage shows that the film is not satisfied with the setting of history, geography and reality limited to time and space, but it also “incorporates a unique manipulation of both documentary genre and documentary myth.”³⁶ As the *BWP* offers documentary tropes such as an introduction in its prologue, announcing that the found-footage the viewers are about to witness is real, hand-held 16mm camera and amateurish mode of cinéma-vérité, its aesthetic “lends itself to the illusion that nothing is hidden. The barriers separating us from the real world are the four walls of the viewfinder.”³⁷ The idea that the filmmakers (i.e., those that supposedly put the film together after the fact) were not present during the shooting and received the footage only later on, consolidates the sense of reality through the supposed unmediated “jerky camera

³⁶ Roger Stahl, "Blair Witchery," *Mythosphere* vol. 2 no. 3 (Aug 2000): 308.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 313-314

movements and unscripted, awkwardly repetitive dialogue.”³⁸ The viewers, supposedly watching “raw footage” found by the police in 1995, do not receive even a slight glimpse of the witch, but rather a documented journey that supposedly validates the event and its footage. While the style itself does not depict witch Elly, what it nevertheless does is to in effect “verify” her existence through the documentary mode—she is present not in documentary content, but rather in documentary style.

We might find a relationship between the monstrous-feminine crone and the forces that haunt the woods in Kristeva’s understanding of phobia. Kristeva insists that there is a distinct difference between fear and phobia, and she links them to language. Whereas fear is the result of an identifiable and named object that threatens or scares the subject, phobia, which is a non-object, on the other hand threatens the “I” because the “thing” of which the subject is afraid is unnamable and can be resolved only with the assistance of the metaphor that “is inscribed not in verbal rhetoric but in the heterogeneity of the psychic system.”³⁹ In other words, negotiating phobia cannot be achieved through naming per se, but rather through ritual, metaphor, style—it is negotiated not in the content of the narrative, but narrative form.

The Blair Witch is monstrous because her off-screen body marks her as unnamable—a phobic force outside of verbal rhetoric, outside of language, outside of

³⁸ Peg Aloï, “Beyond the Blair Witch: A New Horror Aesthetic?” in *Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to Reality TV and Beyond*, ed. Geoff King (Bristol: Intellect Ltd, 2005), 197.

³⁹ Julia Kristeva, 35.

representation, which is further reinforced by her contextualization as an animalistic creature. It does not only signify “a boundary of the self’s clean and proper body,” but rather “distinct entities or territories—between the human and the non-human.”⁴⁰ This is precisely what embodies the attributes of the monstrous-feminine crone and the abjection associated with her. When Heather finds Mike standing with his face against the wall in the cabin of the Blair Witch, he is unresponsive, not because he is dead, but because he has lost hold of the symbolic order. The basement, the subterranean site, is a uterus; Josh has effectively been reincorporated into the maternal body, fused like the fetus to the uterine wall.

Since the monstrous-feminine, according to Creed, “is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order,”⁴¹ the death of the students is not what the witch aspires to achieve, but rather to engender a violent collision between them and the abject. The police, in their role as the third party, find only footage and not the students’ bodies, which disappeared and (presumably) absorbed by the uterine cabin. If the students’ bodies were found, a civilized burial would grant an appropriate end to the violation of the proper and clean body, and this is exactly what the crone fights to prevent, as she drags them to the underworld, the regenerative womb.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 75.

⁴¹ Creed, 76.

It is important to note that it does not matter if Witch Elli is indeed the spirit that occupies the woods, or if the filmmakers intended to play on the perception and confusion of the audience. What matters here is that the myth, the interviews, the website and the documentary style signify the witch as an invisible phobic referent, and that tactic is sufficient to make the audience to draw a connection between the ghosts of the Black Hill Forest and the Blair Witch.

Capturing an Image

What the three students endeavored to achieve in the *BWP* is not to destroy and annihilate the witch, but to record her on camera; that is, to capture the image of the monstrous-feminine crone. Yet, the spirit of Elly has the power to decide the time and place that she will be looked at. The aptitude of the witch for controlling the look of others in the film imperils patriarchal order, which permits the male gaze to fetishize the female body at will. In fact, there is a clear dichotomy in the text between the role of Heather, the stock female character in the horror genre who is not permitted to govern her own gaze and is punished for doing so, as opposed to the so-called savage woman who resides in the woods, and who evades, and therefore is not subordinated to the male gaze.

Linda Williams, in her piece "When the Woman Looks," argues that in classic Hollywood horror films, "the woman's gaze is punished – by narrative processes that

transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy.”⁴² Williams indeed refers to the masochistic relationship between the male monster and the female heroine, but even in *The BWP*, it is Heather and her obstinate gaze that lead the other two male students to encounter their bitter end. She even admits to the camera, in perhaps the most famous scene from the film, that she shoulders the responsibility for their condition because she was the one to insist on carrying out the Blair witch project. She apologizes to Mike and Josh’s mothers, and by that, “recognizes her own hubris.”⁴³ In conjunction with Williams’s argument, Heather’s gaze does not just result in her own punishment, but it also takes responsibility for the innocent boys.

Hence, Heather assumes the role of the intractable female character who finally subordinates herself to the domain of the male gaze, admitting that she should steer clear of the camera and restrict her own gaze. In that regards, the witch’s position outside the symbolic order actually serves to reinforce the order’s boundaries and laws. The witch, on the other hand, remains the untamed shrew whose eyes allow her to voyage through the woods of Maryland without restrictions. She is able to follow and detect the students in her own habitat without being looked at. The search of the three students represents the active look, to which Laura Mulvey refers in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” as

⁴² Linda Williams, “When the Woman looks,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University Of Texas, 1996), 17.

⁴³ Dana Heller, “Found Footage: Feminism Lost in Time,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* vol. 21. no. 1 (spring 2002), 94.

a motif that, “threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified.”⁴⁴ Mulvey discusses the pleasure that the male gaze extracts in classic Hollywood cinema through fetishizing and eroticizing the female body, but the Blair Witch refuses to submit to the gaze, and in the end all attempts by the camera-crew to gaze upon the body of the witch in the woods does not materialize.

The monstrous-feminine Blair Witch has the privilege to look and not to be looked at. The film naturally does not allow the audience to share the witch’s point of view, but the idea that she can decide what the students can film, alludes to her ability to govern their gaze. It is as if the abject could rove around the forest, rip through the civilized areas, and bring havoc to the symbolic order, and if that is not enough, the abject has eyes, and those eyes are stronger than the cameras of the students and any other technological form of human surveillance. Yet, as it lives outside of our visual rhetoric, the gaze of the abject is missing from the *BWP*, because if we could ever share its point of view, we will be thrown out of our visual language. Still, as the endeavor of the students to record the witch goes up in flames, what the students fail to do is not just filming the monstrous-feminine figure, but to bring her from the imagined realm into the prison of the symbolic order.

⁴⁴ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 840.

The Heterotopic Woods

The idea that the witch in the *BWP* can maneuver between spaces, remains invisible at all times and governs the gaze of the camera grants her a privileged position in which the student lack. Her woods and the spatial field in the film can potentially be read as an incarnation of what Michel Foucault calls heterotopia. Heterotopias are, “places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites...real sites that can be found within the culture [that] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”⁴⁵ The site that the witch occupies in the woods is outside of the borders of the village, outside of the so-called civilized realm, but in the same breath, it is juxtaposed to hegemonic sites in “the real world.” This is precisely how Foucault describes heterotopia when he discusses the mirror in relation to the real standpoint and the reflection of the subject. He writes, “the mirror functions as heterotopia ... it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.”⁴⁶

This concept lends the witch in the woods a privileged position capable of escaping from the “real world,” and pass through to the virtual point, where she can exercise female-power beyond the rules of the hegemonic order. The woods that we see

⁴⁵ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 24.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

through the cameras of the students are heterotopic space because they mark the border between a real geographical space in the woods and the imaginary utopian space of the witch; that is, the woods of the witch that the viewfinder is unable to record. The students occupy a real standpoint in the Black Hill Forest, but like the case of the mirror, they cannot pass through the virtual point and detect the witch.

This argument seemingly disputes the connection between the witch as the monstrous-feminine crone and the woods as the regenerative womb because heterotopia, as Foucault argues, is a site between the unreal utopian sites and real geographic sites.⁴⁷ The woods in the film are supposedly, as Morgan argues, are “the quintessential Godless, American wilderness, people with phantoms, devils and savages,”⁴⁸ and do not have a close affinity to utopia, but a close examination of the film reveals that the woods themselves are not an homogenous site. What poses a threat on the community is the witch herself who transformed the site into a source of abjection. The film does not depict the woods as purely wicked regardless of the witch, but as a hunted site because of her.

Moreover, the advantage of the witch to cross through the virtual point and enjoy the perks of her space marks her realm of invisibility in the woods as a utopian site for her. She relishes her victory from her virtual standpoint in her own utopia not only due to her invisibility, but also due to her supernatural power to regulate the gaze of the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Sally J. Morgan, "Heritage Noire: truth, history, and colonial anxiety in The Blair Witch Project," *International Journal Of Heritage Studies* 7, no. 2 (June 2001): 147.

students' camera and the woods. As Foucault explains, heterotopia is not a public realm, accessible to all, but rather "a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable." Heterotopic sites are accessed through rituals, through membership—regardless one "must have a certain permission and make certain gestures."⁴⁹

What the students and the other visitors did not hold, as they entered the penetrable woods (geographically speaking), was membership cards approved and signed by the witch. Mary Brown was probably credible enough to own one, as she was the only living being who faced the monstrous-feminine and came out of the woods unharmed. As she falls under the category of otherness (a woman, mentally-ill, close relationship with the natural world) due to her mental illness, the witch sympathized with her and spared her life. Furthermore, when Mary went into the witch's woods, all she did was to lie "down on the leaves, upon the leaves, kinda watching the pool and looking up at the sky." When the students, on the other hand, ventured into the woods, they did not show respect, but rather shoot a film on their 16mm camera without permission, play with sticks stuck in the ground, urinate wherever they wanted (there is a shot of Heather urinating behind a tree) and set a campfire on the heterotopic land of the witch. In fact, the witch does not execute any plan against them in the beginning of their journey, but

⁴⁹ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 26.

only later in the film, when it is clear that they are unable to respect what the woods signify.

What the students found in the forest then was a site of abjection, but it does not contradict the argument that the witch alone resides in her own realm, unwilling to share it with the symbolic order. However, as mentioned, ^{the woods} in the *BWP* is not a homogeneous site divided into two territories of heterotopia and abjection, but a phobic realm for any human who encounters them because they are so complex. Since phobia can be resolved only with the assistance of the metaphor, as Kristeva argued,⁵⁰ the mysteries of the woods can never be solved, because there is not a metaphor that can illustrate to the three students how the real and the non-real can coexist and how the witch can derive pleasure out of what they see as the place where “meaning collapses.”

When the students discover that they have been moving in circles and are unable to detect their location on the map, nervousness and horror gradually consume them, because for them, the idea of traversing the virtual point into the realm of invisibility means crossing into a realm where they may lose their verbal and visual rhetoric. It seems almost absurd to draw parallels between abjection and heterotopia, but in the context of *BWP*, one should bear in mind that both the abject and heterotopias are a matter of geographical perception. What the students aim for is to get a glimpse with their cameras of the virtual point and leave the woods, but this virtual point drags them into the dark

⁵⁰ Kristeva, 35.

abyss. It is as if the students, heterotopically speaking, attempt to take a picture of their reflection in the mirror (the witch in the film), but instead of doing that, they find the place where “meaning collapses.” What is horrifying about this mirror then is that the students see almost nothing from their standpoint, but they know that the mirror can see them, and this black mirror wants to drag them into the realm of invisibility.

The film naturally does not share the point of view or advocate for the monstrous-feminine gaze in any given way, but it marks the heterotopic site, unlike Foucault’s intention, as a hazard for the symbolic order. Yet, as it grants the witch the perks to remain elusive and regulate the gaze within a specific site, the film also emphasizes the uniqueness of her dwelling space, in contrast with other real sites such as the adjacent town of Burkittsville, formally Blair. As Foucault argues, heterotopias stand “in relation to all the space that remains.” It tries “to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory.” This vague concept does not render how exactly those illusory spaces unveil other real spaces, and yet, Foucault illustrates how the brothel plays a role of producing “a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself.”⁵¹

Foucault’s reading of Bentham’s architectural composition of the Panopticon may illustrate how the heterotopic site of the woods in the *BWP* exposes other real sites. As he explains, the Seventeenth Century brought dreadful plagues to Europe, and as a result,

⁵¹ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 27.

villages took measures in the form of curfews to keep the residents under surveillance and gain control over any residential space through a spatial partitioning, threatening those who dare to cross into the forbidden realm with a death punishment.⁵² With syndics visiting all the houses in the village and registering all the living inhabitants to reassure their state, healthy or infected, “the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of every-day life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power.”⁵³

As the order aimed to create a social utopia for the governed city, it had to purify the residential space and exclude the leper, who had to remain in quarantine, yet under surveillance.⁵⁴ In contrast with the primitive method used in the Middle Ages to enclose and hide the prisoner in the dungeon where there are no windows through which the sunlight can penetrate, Bentham’s Panopticon gave the supervisor the ability to gaze at the leper or any other prisoner in any given moment. The Panopticon’s principle was to place the prisoners in a peripheral building divided into cells, in which had one window overlooking the inner side of the ring, strategically placed to grant the guards a clear vision, and an outer window through which the light could enter. As Foucault

⁵² Foucault, "Panopticism from Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison," 1-2.

⁵³ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 4.

emphasizes, visibility itself had become the trap that gave birth to the prison, as we know it today.⁵⁵

What the invisible monstrous-feminine crone does then from her own realm of invisibility is to assume the role of the guard who keep the students visible, in a sphere that they perceive as a space of abjection, while she, on the other hand, has a clear vision of them. In other words, her existence in the realm of invisibility challenges the assumption that the keys of the panopticon are only in the hands of the symbolic order. Furthermore, according to the interviews in the beginning of the film, the town locals themselves are in quarantine, locked in their own panopticon, unable to come close to the woods, fearing of what the witch may do to them. Her site in the woods has the advantage as it exposes the real sites surrounding her as human prisons chained to the symbolic order. Moreover, the witch exposes the naïve attempt of the students to move without restriction from one place to another in the woods and leave them at will.

Once the students get a glimpse of the heterotopic woods, their ability to cope with it goes up in flames, because once they take one step out of the symbolic order, there gradually lose the metaphors that illustrate to them how to engender a meaning. Their attempt to bring the witch into the realm of visibility through the camera, and by that drag her to their own prison of visibility, is ultimately the endeavor to “help” her to break free from abjection and enter the symbolic order, but the paradox here is that even after the

⁵⁵ Ibid, 5.

students seemingly broke free from the curfew in the town and dared to cross into the woods, they brought with them cameras, and as the cameras kept recording their journey, the viewfinders made sure that the students would remain in the realm of visibility at all time. In fact, the camera was the only device keeping them in touch with the symbolic order, not just because it recorded them, but also because it kept them in the realm of the visual and verbal rhetoric, permitting them to express themselves. Interestingly, in the last scene of the film, the camera falls on the ground, breaks and stops recording, because the students eventually passed through the virtual point of heterotopia, broke free from the panopticon and entered the realm of invisibility, kidnapped by the witch.

The disappearance of the students into the realm of the witch is perhaps the most significant statement of the film, because it challenges our positions as an audience with the monstrous-feminine. We are not able to see her and we do not know where the students were gone, and because of that, what intimidates us about the monstrous-feminine crone is not what her body or powers can do to us. After all, once she resides in the realm of visibility, we can naturalize her. Therefore, the reason the Blair Witch wreaks havoc to the symbolic order is because once we meet her, we are no longer here, and this is perhaps the incarnation of the abject.

Conclusion

Salvoj Zizek demonstrates how the proximity to our neighbors or enemies plays a role in shaping the public opinion and engenders an ethical illusion in the era of biopolitics. He claims that “it is much more difficult for us to torture an individual than to sanction from afar the dropping of a bomb which would cause the more painful deaths of thousands,”⁵⁶ because of “the proximity (of the tortured subject) which causes sympathy and makes torture unacceptable is not the victim’s mere physical proximity, but its most fundamental, the proximity of the Neighbour.”⁵⁷ That is, what repels us in torture is the idea that the abuser is too close to the victim. Zizek shows how in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the monster is permitted to share his perspective and tell his story to the readers, and this promotes the notion that “the monster is not a ‘thing’, a horrible object no one dares to confront.”⁵⁸

Horror is relative to our proximity to the witch. Since the Blair Witch remains off-screen throughout the entire film, she is linked to Kristeva’s interpretation of phobia. Since phobia can be resolved only with the assistance of the metaphor, the ghost of the witch, living in the regenerative womb, is constantly outside of language, outside of representation—she resides in the invisible realm of heterotopia. As non-object we cannot sympathize with her character. The film also magnifies the distance of the witch

⁵⁶ Salvoj Zizek, *Violence* (London: GBR, Profile Books, 2010), 36.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 38.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 39.

from us through its title: the Blair Witch instead of Witch Elly. The title creates a linkage between her role and language, which “simplifies the designated thing, reducing it to a single feature.”⁵⁹

As the witch also assumes the role of a ghost, she is identified as immortal. Žizek writes that immortality is associated with evil since “evil is something which threatens to return forever, a spectral dimension which magically survives its physical annihilation and continues to haunt us.”⁶⁰ What the students did not record in the *BWP* is the essence of what we are unable to keep under surveillance, in the panopticon, and thus, the only footage they can obtain is the residues of immortality. As the immortal witch plugs into the role of the guard of the prison, she essentially promises to keep the locals of the town visible eternally. Moreover, even when the students are devoured in the uterine cabin, they perhaps break free from the panopticon and the realm of visibility of the symbolic order and pass through the virtual point, but not from the eyes of the witch.

Since the film is also concerned with what the students see through their viewfinder and not Elly’s point of view, it also reconstitutes the proximity between the audience and the ghosts of woods. The film encourages us to fear “uncivilized” territories, and the ghosts that they occupy them, rather than bring those ghosts closer to the audience—to give them form, voice, in short, to make them human.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 52.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 56.

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