

The Blair Witch Project Revisited

*And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*
—William Butler Yeats

In the summer of 1999, a student film called *The Blair Witch Project*—produced for thirty-five thousand dollars—grossed fifty million dollars in its first week of wide release. Naturally critics focused on its phenomenal box office success. Janet Maslin, then writing for the *New York Times*, found the film remarkable for the way its makers had “revolutionized movie marketing” by linking it to the Internet. In the *New Yorker* David Denby suggested that the film might be “a watershed moment in which the young audience . . . begins to turn its back on routine Hollywood product.”

Reviewed without regard for what its startling success might actually *mean*—other than a threat to Hollywood’s overblown production standards—or for what, in spite of its amateur execution, it might be saying about the generation it portrayed, the film did what everything else that makes it big in America does: after hitting the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, it disappeared altogether from the radar screen.

However, *Blair Witch* remains a disturbing little movie, a millennial artifact made by young people about their generation’s inability to read portents and heed signs. Filmed in an era when all signs and symbols are thought by academics to be hopelessly rooted in cultural biases—and therefore impervious to analysis and powerless to inform—the movie itself went unanalyzed and raised no cultural alarms. But four years have passed since the film’s release. In the interim—which includes the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the American invasion of Iraq—sensibilities have shifted in the world, and we have entered what nearly everyone agrees is “uncharted” territory. Did *The Blair Witch Project* unwittingly describe this territory and perhaps predict the deep-seated communal dread produced by our entry into it?

I want to look at the movie again. For my purposes the inferior quality of filmmaking (shaky camera work, inadequate sound track, illogical editing) is

irrelevant. So too is the intent of the filmmakers, Daniel Myrick, 35, and Eduardo Sanchez, 30. I am going to treat this movie not with an assessment of its marketability and not with an emphasis on its clumsiness of expression—its failure—but with an eye for what its failure expresses *accidentally*. In other words I want to peel back the film's veneer—its klutzy and predictable horror-movie effects—and look for evidence of unintentional profundity.

The movie invites such an analysis. Its premise is simple. A title card at the beginning reads: "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." With this disclaimer Myrick and Sanchez absolve themselves of responsibility and throw the burden of creating context and meaning onto the viewers.

Heather Donahue, the director of the documentary, is energetic and mouthy, and this film project is her baby. She ends each sentence (even a command) as if it were a question. She is not likeable.

Her cameraman, Joshua Leonard, who looks like a strung out rock-and-roll roadie, reinforces this impression by revealing that he does not know whether the numbers on his camera lens indicate meters or feet. He seems untrustworthy.

Michael Williams, the sound man, is a cloying young fellow, eager to do his job and willing to be led—up to a point. He is almost despicable.

The film contains no heroes, no sympathetic main characters. Flying in the face of textbook convention, this movie is about to demonstrate just how ugly getting lost—relentlessly, hopelessly, fatally lost—can be.

We first see these twenty-something kids preparing for their filming adventure like children getting ready for a sleepover; marshmallows are the highlight of their shopping trip. Standing in a graveyard in Burkittsville, Maryland, formerly the town of Blair, Heather announces (gravely) the purpose of her project—to discover the truth about the Blair Witch. She then interviews a few locals. No clear story emerges from these interviews, but vague warnings abound. One local describes how, in the early 1940s, seven children were murdered by someone who made them face the wall and then killed them one by one. A mother tells Heather, "I believe enough [in the witch] not to go up there [into the woods]." The child in her arms clamps a hand over her mother's mouth. Heather, oblivious to this speak-no-evil image, barges on with her agenda, asking leading questions and putting answers in the woman's mouth. Her need to make a movie—to be a filmmaker—clearly outweighs the firsthand information she collects. Armed with

cameras and bags of marshmallows, and steeled by the illusion that she is in charge, she remains impervious to signs of doom.

Heather and crew get a motel room near the point where they will enter the Black Hills Forest the next morning. Josh (filmed by Heather) sprawls arrogantly on one of the beds taking several pulls from a pint of Scotch. Heather asks him to pour her a shot, and he hands her the bottle. Mike, the sound man, tells Heather, “Oh, no, you can’t do that, you’re the director.” He is not really kidding, but he chuckles obligingly when she decides to drink.

She takes a long swig and says, very slowly: “I fucking *hate* Scotch.”

At this point some viewers might feel their first twinge of real fear: successful expedition leaders, especially in movies, don’t participate in casual drinking and vulgar language with those they are about to lead. Clearly Heather, for all her eagerness to be the leader, has not absorbed the protocol.

The next morning the trio drives along a narrow dirt road bordering a stream. “Serious woods around here,” someone says off camera. Heather conducts another interview, this time with two strange fishermen who are standing back-to-back on a rock and who tell conflicting stories about the witch. After the interview the kids park at the edge of the woods. Then like Dante’s pilgrim in *The Inferno*, “being so full of sleep” and about to “blunder off the true path,” they stumble away from their car, weighed down by backpacks, film equipment, and hangovers. Josh and Mike file past Heather, but instead of panning the camera so we can see them enter the woods, Heather holds the shot on the car as she walks backward, away from it. A half-full plastic water bottle has been left on the roof of the car. The shot is accompanied by Heather’s voice-over: “Oh my God, very heavy.” She is talking about her backpack, perhaps, but we can also take her voice-over to mean that the abandoned water bottle is a “heavy” clue, that the trio’s failure to take the water with them suggests a fatal arrogance—a failure to understand that to be human is to be dependent—on various forms of help, sustenance, and succor—in ways that everything else living in the woods (including the witch) is not.

That night in the tent, there is a lot of laughter about farts, and the next morning some discussion about things that went bump in the night. But the joking soon stops when the three realize they are actually lost. Looking at Heather’s topographical map of the Black Hills Forest, Mike shakes his head: “To tell you the truth,” he says, “this is like Greek to me—useless.” (It is a small thing, perhaps, but chilling nonetheless, that Greek, the language at the heart of Western civilization, is

considered synonymous not with “unreadable” but “useless”—intrinsically without worth.) Mike hints at Heather’s inadequate leadership, but the only model for good leadership he can think of is the Skipper of *Gilligan’s Island*. And again it is the Skipper’s pudginess—his *affect*—that Mike finds worthy of comment. (I know: they are just kids fooling around on a camping trip. But remember, they are going to die for lack of guidance.)

Day Three: Josh and Mike get angry at their director. Then, as the strange cries outside the tent become louder and more mysterious, anger turns into fear. Josh declares, “This [being lost] has nothing, *nothing* to do with what we’re here for!” In other words he simply cannot believe that anything could be more powerful than the *intentions* of a film crew. In his world, the American world of his upbringing, where everything is said to be possible, there is no distinction between intent and result, desire and gratification.

On the morning of Day Four, they discover ominous piles of rocks around their tent. Heather, her voice trembling with self-important anxiety, says, “I’m seriously fucking positive these weren’t here before.” At this point Josh and Mike rebel against their leader. The three agree to give up and go home, but Heather now discovers that the map is missing. She accuses the guys of “fucking” with her. They deny it. Josh says to Heather, “[Losing that map] is the least responsible thing you could have done, man.” From this point on, until he disappears, Josh addresses Heather as “man.” In this context the casual masculine reference sounds like wishful thinking.

Heather reassures her crew that everything will be all right. “It’s very hard to get lost in America these days,” she says, “and it’s even harder to stay lost.” We now see that these doomed children understand themselves to be—not in the forest, not in Nature, not in an earthly domain—but in *America*. An America where nature and wilderness have been tamed and televised. A safe, predictable, wired America, which seems not to be a land or a continent at all, but a malleable figment of cyber-imagination, where everything can be—and perhaps already is—known.

They cross a stream, not for the first time. Water—the trail they should be following if they want to be found—weaves through this film like a serpent. But rather than thinking of water as a trail, with a source and a destination, they think of it as an obstacle. All they can do is cross it, over and over again. Josh gives Heather the finger, then turns his back on her. Mike starts laughing uncontrollably. “You know what?” he calls out. “I kicked that fucking map in the creek yesterday. It was useless.” Josh and Heather go ballistic on Mike, almost coming to

blows. “You’ve betrayed us all, way fucking beyond,” screams Heather, sounding relieved to be able to blame someone else.

But they *are* lost and exhausted, and finger-pointing soon settles down into good old-fashioned terror when they discover a bunch of ominous twig figures hanging in the woods. The largest of these is a spooky rendition of an ancient runic figure called the Burning Man. Suggestive of a headless, spread-eagled crucifix, the figure swings like a scarecrow in the breeze.

“No redneck is this creative,” says Mike, apparently convinced that a witch might be. Then he stands up and screams, “Oh God, please help us!” The word “God” has never sounded so empty.

When the sun comes up on Day Five, Josh finds his stuff strewn all over the ground and covered with a mysterious slime. The three of them throw on their backpacks and in desperation scream the lyrics of the “National Anthem” and “America the Beautiful” at the leafless trees. With God gone, this is the only appeal left to them. After wandering all day with a field compass, they end up right back where they started.

On the morning of Day Six, Josh is missing. Heather and Mike, paralyzed with fear, hang around, waiting for him to show up. When darkness falls they hear Josh screaming, but they cannot locate him, so they cower all night in the tent.

Day Seven: Heather finds a bundle of twigs tightly wrapped with strips of Josh’s blue shirt. She tosses the bundle away from the tent, as if it were radioactive. She sets up a tripod and films herself walking toward Mike, who sits under a tree, rocking back and forth like a shell-shocked soldier. She joins him on the ground, and they rock together. Later she opens the bundle of twigs and finds what we can only imagine are bits of Josh’s bone and gristle, smeared with blood.

That night, Heather lies on her back in the tent, aims the camera at her own face, and films a terror-filled confession and apology directed at the three sets of parents—hers, Mike’s, and Josh’s. She accepts full blame for the fate of her crew: “Hungry, cold and hunted.” She admits to her blind and willful insistence throughout the project, and then says, in the most chilling and moving lines of the film: “I’m scared to close my eyes, and I’m scared to open them.”

Then, as if drawn by fate itself, Mike and Heather, following what they believe to be Josh’s cries for help, leave their tent, walk through the eerie night woods, and come upon an abandoned house. In the basement of that house, to the accompaniment of Heather’s screams, Mike is seen obediently facing the wall. We are left to assume that he and Heather meet their demise in precisely the manner described by one of those unsophisticated locals seven days earlier.

What can be made of this disturbing little movie? Its protagonists are doomed by their inability to read maps and interpret signs—but might the movie itself endure, saved by its plentiful supply of intelligible (if unintended) omens? Given a proper context, could it be seen as a kind of primitive bridge between millennia, and thus as a significant cultural phenomenon? Might David Denby have been onto something, without knowing why, when he called *Blair Witch* a “watershed moment”?

I am going to go out on a limb. I am going to talk about the Age of Aquarius, what the astrological age we are living in was called before the 1980s, when commercial interests popularized the more generic term New Age. The replacement moniker admits that there is such a thing as an astrological age but fails to credit astrology as the source. Probably a wise marketing decision, since astrology is generally thought to be a pseudoscience. But discarding the name Aquarius is a little like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The term New Age doesn’t really mean anything, and it pales in comparison to the original. I want to put the baby back into the bath.

According to Ptolemy’s *Almagest*, compiled in the second century A.D., the Age of Aquarius began in 1997. (Dates for Aquarius vary; I have chosen Ptolemy’s for its wonderful coincidence with the filming of *Blair Witch*.) Ptolemy’s calculations still apply today and, like those of modern-day astronomers, are based on a celestial phenomenon known as the precession of the equinox. Simply put, the term precession describes how the equinoctial points at the intersection of the earth’s ecliptic and the celestial equator move ever so slowly (at a speed of roughly 2,160 years per astrological age) through the twelve signs of the zodiac. All of recorded human history spans but a few of these ages. The first written records appeared during the Age of Taurus the Bull, three Ages back (c. 4500 B.C.) The Age of Aries the Ram commenced in concert with the supremacy of Ur in lower Mesopotamia (c. 2200 B.C.) The Age of Pisces the Fishes began sometime around the birth of Christ. Today, as the song says, we are still at “the dawning of the Age of Aquarius.”

The constellation Aquarius is called the Water Bearer. In the eastern United States, it can be seen halfway up in the southern sky on a mid-November evening. The urn, or cup, a little triangle of stars with a star at its center, now lies on the celestial equator. Aquarius was thought by the ancients to be a careless water bearer, spilling his water in a double stream of stars into the mouth of a constellation known as the Southern Fish.

If the larger context for *Blair Witch* can be said to be the Age of Aquarius, this connotation of carelessness lends a heightened meaning to the scene in which Heather films the neglected water bottle on top of the car, a “heavy” clue carelessly ignored by the pilgrims.

Now, keeping in mind the Age of Pisces (with its symbol of two vertically opposed fishes), we can back up a few frames to the trio’s encounter with the two weird fishermen standing back-to-back on a rock. Viewing them opposed to each other, telling contradictory stories about the witch, assigning different blame for the murders of the children, one can easily imagine them representing the Piscean Age and its preoccupation (as typified by Christianity) with the exterior forces of Good and Evil.

Shortly thereafter, Heather, Josh, and Mike, unable to believe or trust the seemingly archaic language of the fishermen—their duality, their opposition—pass by the symbolic water bottle and enter the woods of the Aquarian Age, without a readable map.

“All blame aside,” says Josh before disappearing for good, “this is really fucked up.” And it is. Knowing how to read a topographical map, or use a compass, or follow a stream would have saved the trio—but they have mastered none of these tools or skills. Raised on television, and with the Internet as their primary tool, they are severed from the hard realities of the very environment that sustains them. Their arrogance is maddening, their ignorance painful to watch, but their predicament is as moving, existential, and deadly as it gets. If these are the young pilgrims of the New Age, their predicament is shared by us all.

In Dante’s time the reader of *The Inferno* could have been relied upon to understand that when the poet wrote, “the Fishes are quivering at the horizon’s edge,” he meant “four o’clock in the morning.” People in the year 1300 lived under the stars, which is to say, in a visual relationship to something profoundly nonhuman. Obviously there is little possibility that Western culture will again take its cues from the movement of heavenly bodies. In any case, living as we do under the gauze of illuminated automobile exhaust, we can hardly be faulted for failing to find—much less find meaning in—the constellations. (They are hardly mentioned during the star show at the Rose Planetarium in New York City.)

Yet as modern astronomers probe beyond the constellations toward the big bang, we modern mortals still grapple with the same existential questions that inspired the ancients to assign a divinatory scheme to constellations in the first place. To those who would object that constellations are nothing more than the

projection of the human psyche onto the visible cosmos, I would say, at least they are that: a perceived sign, a psychic map, a connect-the-dots kind of child's play—unsophisticated and, for this very reason, extremely potent.

Sophocles, writing in the last quarter of the Age of Aries, has his mad hero Ajax tie a ram—the symbol of the age—upright to a pillar, whereupon he whips it ferociously and then cuts out its tongue. How better to demonstrate, as the Age of Aries winds down, that neither the warlike ram, ruled by Mars, nor Ajax himself has any real power in peace-loving Athens?

Christ, who virtually ushers in the Age of Pisces, and whose story is later suffused with the symbolism of fish and fishermen, is—*must be*, we could say—sacrificed, not as a fish, but as the *lamb* of God—the offspring of the outgoing Age of Aries.

How will the notion of Aquarius pertain? How will this new age play out? There is no water bearer in the heavens, of course, and the power of the stars to affect the destinies of human beings is nothing if not suspect to the modern ear. But we ignore humankind's fragile position in the hierarchy of creation at some peril; it does no harm to seek an echo from simpler times. If the presence of an astrological archetype can be discerned in something as remote from antiquity as a hastily-thrown-together student film, then perhaps we can find (postmodern objections notwithstanding) evidence of this kind of symbolic language embedded in other forms of artistic and spontaneous expression as well, including current events. Especially in "uncharted" times. If a pattern can be discerned, then there is one. As with science the only criteria for a successful model is that it works.

Is it of more than passing interest, in this regard, that the number 11, seared into our minds by the televised events of 9/11, is the number of Aquarius itself—the 11th sign of the zodiac? Is it fitting that the World Trade Center's Twin Towers, rising like the numeral 11 so far above the rest of the city, were in fact two vertically opposed structures (North and South), which could be said, in retrospect, to have symbolized the outgoing Piscean Age while simultaneously calling attention to the Aquarian 11?

Poppycock? Perhaps. But it makes an intriguing template, which is all I am proposing here. According to a report released on May 22, 2002, by the United Nations Environment Program, the most pressing worldwide issue during the first century of this new millennium will be the availability of freshwater. When *Blair Witch* opened nationwide in 1999, much of the U.S. was in the third year of a severe six-year drought. Newspapers featured photos of dried-up reservoirs and

lake beds and ran stories about precariously low aquifers. Heat waves were breaking records across the nation. Much media ballyhoo followed the discovery of water in a four-and-a-half-billion-year-old meteorite from outer space. An ominous rain cloud dumped what many observers agreed was a “biblical” amount of water (four inches in two hours) on the impervious streets of Manhattan. That same morning, the *New York Times* ran a feature article on what they called the “puzzling” popularity of over-sized home aquariums.

A watershed moment indeed.

For all its amateur cinematic technique, and in spite of the cynical manner in which it was marketed, *The Blair Witch Project* is a movie about the unrecognizable terrain of a new age and the unreadable—for many—maps of the old. It is a merciless document, bleak to its core. All the pilgrims are lost. But their footage (their art) isn’t. For those who will have to venture into the woods, the footage seems to offer this advice: heed the locals. Listen to the unsophisticated voice. This advice applies to the film itself. Listen to *its* unsophisticated voice. Not to the commercial success its horror engendered at the time of its release, but to the deeper and more problematic horror it suggests unwittingly.

In the end, thirst *is* what kills Heather: thirst for a story she has no idea how to tell. Her confession of blind arrogance, prompted by her nearly paralytic terror when she understands where that arrogance has led, might well serve as an eye-opener to the human inhabitants of this warming planet, faced now with the diversion of unspeakable terror, unknowable enemies, and unintelligible war.