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PERVERSE PLEASURES:
SPECTATORSHIP
THE BLAIR WITCH PROJECT

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A Research Report submitted to the Faculty of Humanity, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts.

Johannesburg, 2005

By drawing on contemporary scholarship that addresses spectatorship in the cinema generally, and in the horror genre specifically, I analyze the perverse pleasure afforded by *The Blair Witch Project*. To do this I argue that pleasure in horror is afforded through the masochistic positioning of the viewer, especially in relation to psychoanalytic theories surrounding gender in spectator positioning. I also look at the way the film re-deploys conventions, both documentary conceptions of the 'real', as well as generic expectations of horror, to activate the perverse pleasure of horror.

The Blair Witch Project **Spectatorship** **Psychoanalytic Film Theory**
Horror **Film Conventions** **Gender**
Abjection **Monstrous Feminine** **Masochism**

Declaration

I declare that this research essay is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Masters of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

_____

Tamiko Hayter

_____ day of _____ 2005.

To Mom & Dad,
thank you for being there for me not only
during the completion of my degree,
but throughout my life.
Your love and support will continue to help
and sustain me throughout my life,
and with it I know my dreams
will always become reality.

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Chapter 1:
Introduction

> On October 21, 1994, three student filmmakers, Heather Donohue, Joshua Leonard, and Michael Williams, hiked into the Black Forest of Maryland to shoot a documentary film on a local legend called 'Blair Witch' and were never seen or heard from again. A year later their footage was found. *The Blair Witch Project* is their legacy, documenting their final days and nights in the woods and the events that unfolded before their cameras.
> (*The Blair Witch Project* opening title card)

In January 1999 the film *The Blair Witch Project* made its debut at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah and instantly became the darling of the festival. Although it did not win any awards, the film created a huge stir, playing to remarkably large audiences at midnight screenings. This low-budget film, written, directed, and edited by two Orlando University post-graduates, Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick, was subsequently snapped up by Artisan Entertainment in an all night bidding session for $1 million (www.cnn.com/showbiz/movies/9907/15/blairwitch). When the film was commercially released country-wide in August later that year, it generated massive hysteria and hype, the likes of which is seldom seen. *Blair Witch* currently holds the record for the biggest budget-to-box-office gross ratio: from an initial budget of $35 000, the film went onto make $240.5 million worldwide, thus the film made almost $7 000 for every dollar spent (Total Film, 2005:38). Not only did this independent film rival Hollywood 'blockbusters', but it also captured the public's imagination, instantly becoming part of popular culture, having now been praised, vilified or parodied countless times in films, literature and on the internet.[1] *The Blair Witch Project* remains, undoubtedly, one of the most successful and debate-provoking horror films in recent years, and is even seen by one film reviewer, David Keyes as, "a redefining moment in the horror genre, the first since *The Exorcist* that has generated enough courage to challenge what we regard as 'terrifying'" (www.rottentomatoes.com). What is of interest to this study is the question of how this film was able to achieve such an impact, especially since it lacked stars, special effects, or even a conventional narrative structure. How was this film able to touch such a nerve with filmgoers?

The Blair Witch Project purports to be the footage of three film students, Heather Donohue, Joshua Leonard, and Michael Williams, found a year after their disappearance. The footage shows the students embarking on a senior thesis project to document the Maryland legend of the Blair Witch. Gradually their terror mounts as they become hopelessly lost, despite having a map and compass, and are disturbed at night by unnatural noises, such as children crying, and the appearance of strange stick figurines and piles of stones outside of their tent. They try desperately to deny a supernatural presence, especially Heather, but are chased one night through the woods by something terrifying, something unseen by the audience. The next morning Joshua has disappeared, the only trace of him is a scrap of his shirt material with something which might be bloody teeth or fingers inside. The last night in the footage, Heather and Mike, cameras in hand, follow Joshua's cries to a dark, dilapidated house that has bloody children's handprints on the wall. Thereafter Mike's camera goes blank and Heather, rushing down to him, is knocked over, and the screen goes blank. The film ends, leaving the audience in confusion, the monster unseen and the fate of the students, besides their disappearance, unknown.

The legend of the Blair Witch, up to the student's disappearance, tells the story of a spinster, Ellie Kedward, accused of witchcraft by the children of the town of Blair in the late 1780s. Ellie is banished into the woods in the cold of winter and left to die. The next year half of the town's children vanish and the area is abandoned in terror for the next forty eight years, until the town of Burkittsville is founded on the site. In the year 1825 a young girl, Eileen Treacle, is pulled into the stream by a ghostly white hand as her parents picnic nearby. Her body is never recovered and for thirteen days afterwards the stream is clogged with oily bundles of sticks. In 1886 an eight-year-old girl goes missing. The girl returns but one of the search parties does not; the bodies of the five men are found tied together at the arms and legs and completely disembowelled. The next time the legend is resurrected is in 1940 when a local hermit, Rustin Parr, is told by the voice of an old woman to kill seven children and is tried and hung for their murder. The last instalment is, of course, the mysterious disappearance of Heather, Josh and Mike.

The Blair Witch Project itself imparts very little knowledge about the Blair Witch: instead the film should be seen as part of a multimedia platform that included an extensive website (www.blairwitch.com), a documentary, *Curse of the Blair Witch* (1999) and *Blair Witch Project*: A

Dossier (Stern,1999).[2] The website started generating attention about the students' disappearance months before the film's release, and *Curse of the Blair Witch* was broadcast just before its opening: both elements generated great anticipation - an aspect I will be exploring as central to pleasure in horror films. However, these features were not just marketing embellishments, but an integral part of the viewing experience, deepening and fleshing-out the myth. This was especially important as the film was presenting itself as 'reality' with the support of 'authentic' documentation; such as police reports, newspaper clippings and historical journal entries, as well as 'expert' testimony from scholars, policemen and family members. Part of the stir the film created was due to its blurring of the boundary between fiction and veracity, with very early audiences apparently unaware that it was a complete construction and that the students were actors who were alive and well.

Bearing in mind its multi-media presentation and blurring of reality, what pleasure did the film itself offer audiences that could account for its popularity? How could a film that is unpleasant, in that it contains disturbing imagery, and is about terrifying events, be pleasurable? Why do audiences go to films to be scared if film viewing is supposed to be a gratifying experience? What role could horror possible play? This is a question many theorists have grappled with; Yvonne Leffler (2000) traces two main arguments in the question of what function horror plays. The first argument is that horror provides a transcendent, sublime experience: "anything that could arouse fear or wonder in the face of something strong and frightening" (Leffler, 2000:64), that allows the spectator to transcend boundaries by meeting something beyond the self. Lovecraft suggests that this 'cosmic fear' keeps the capacity for awe alive amongst our materialistic sophistication (as cited in Carroll, 1990:163). At a simpler level, as Noël Carroll posits: "Being thrilled, even frightened (albeit aesthetically), it might be said, relieves the emotional blandness of something called modern life" (1990:167). Similarly, William Paul sees horror as 'festival art', "part of a modern carnival culture which allows us to abandon ourselves to a liberating expression of emotions" (as cited in Leffler, 2000:57). It has also been argued that horror, like gladiatorial combat and public executions, functions to enable the "experience of seeing, and coping with seeing, something repugnant" (Leffler, 2000:57).

The second argument surrounding horror's role, according to Leffler, is, "an encounter with taboo elements repressed within the ego" (Leffler, 2000:59). Charles Derry asserts that horror films are popular because they, like nightmares, "speak to our subconscious and – as do our dreams – deal with issues that are often painful for us to deal with consciously and directly" (1987:162). Whilst Noël Carroll, drawing on the work of film theorist John Mack and psychoanalyst Ernest Jones's analysis of dreams, suggests that horror may serve as wish-fulfilment; that it may gratify unconscious wishes and fantasies that revolve around deep-set human anxieties, such as: "those involving destructive aggression, castration, separation and abandonment, devouring or being devoured, and fear regarding loss of identity and fusion with the mother" (1990:172). According to Carroll, all of these are infantile fantasies, traumas and anxieties repressed by the subject; fantasies that are unthinkable and forbidden, but re-visited aesthetically in horror films. Carol Clover also maintains that horror films deal with the "engagement of repressed fears and desires and its re-enactment of the residual conflict surrounding those feelings" (1992:11).[3] Robin Wood postulates that the true subject of horror is "the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatized, as in our nightmare, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending (when it exists) typically signifies the restoration of repression" (1986:75). He goes on to contend that the horror genre's label as 'popular', 'escapist', 'pulp' or 'low' by many critics means that films that are dismissed as innocuous by their detractors are able more directly to address repressed feelings than more highbrow films and can, therefore, be far more radical and fundamentally undermining than conscious social criticism. He writes: "the most dangerous and subversive implications can disguise themselves and escape detection" (1986:78) and, thus, censorship. Annette Kuhn concurs that, "under the cloak of fantasy, issues of actuality may be addressed more directly" (1990:16).

The main question of this study, however, will be what pleasures *The Blair Witch Project* may be said to provide that could account for the film's impact. This becomes important, as Tania Modleski (1986) points out, as pleasure itself is not necessarily 'innocent'. Modleski traces how pleasure has been denigrated, seen by various critics to be equated with 'popular entertainment', as a means of controlling the 'masses' and reconciling them to the dominant ideology: "The masses, it is said, are offered various forms of easy, false pleasure as a way of keeping them unaware of their own desperate vacuity" (Modleski, 1986:156). Matei Calinescu suggests that this mass

culture offers: “an ideologically manipulated illusion of taste, ‘that lures its audience to false complacency with the promise of equally false and insipid pleasures’” (as cited in Modleski, 1986:158). Thus, as modernist critic Lionel Trilling maintains, “high art had dedicated itself to an attack on pleasure” (as cited in Modleski, 1986:157) as pleasure is the province of mass art. However, Modleski argues that contemporary horror confounds this equation of pleasure with ideology; as a genre it is engaged in an assault on bourgeois culture itself. She asserts that, although popular, the horror genre is engaged in an adversarial relationship with contemporary culture and ideology: that it, “is as apocalyptic and nihilistic, as hostile to meaning, form, pleasure and the specious good as many types of high art” (1986:162).[4]

The question, for this study, then becomes: since *The Blair Witch Project* is undoubtedly popular, given its box office returns and attention received by popular media, what pleasure does *The Blair Witch Project* potentially offer the spectator, and is this pleasure merely reinforcing hegemonic thinking or does it perhaps offer a space for opposition, especially in regard to the formation of identity? To address this question, I will be drawing on post-structuralist psychoanalytic theory that regards film spectatorship as playing a part in structuring the unconscious processes of human subjectivity, and that film both reflects and structures psychic reality. If horror, as discussed previously, is a site for the exploration of repression, this is especially so of horror films, as the screen is seen by early psychoanalytic film theorists as, “the site for the projection of our fantasies and desires, that is for our unconscious” (Hayward, 1996: 290). These theories will looked at in more depth in the next chapter as it examines the textual relations between the screen and the spectator to understand the unconscious operations at work in *The Blair Witch Project*. The importance of such an examination is clear in light of the feminist studies around film theory that have uncovered the ideological processes at work in film. As Molly Haskell, a leading feminist film theorist in the 1970s writes: “film reflects society and vice versa and in doing so reflects the ideological construction of women” (as cited in Hayward, 1996:99). Feminist film theorists uncovered the unconscious mechanisms of patriarchy and the construction of gender bound up in film viewing. With these theories as a starting point, I will be examining in what way subjectivity, especially gendered subjectivity and spectator positioning, is encoded in *The Blair Witch Project*. As has been suggested by Susan Hayward, the film theorist acts as a dream analyst (1996:291),

and this essay will analyze what *Blair Witch*, a 'dream' of popular culture, may tell us about ideology relating to potential aspects of subjectivity in the late 1990s.

Questions of gender are important in studying spectatorship, even more so in the horror genre, which Carol Clover argues: "speaks deeply and obsessively to male fears" (1992:61). It is a genre that specifically speaks to male fears of femininity. The horror genre itself, and especially the 'slasher' sub-genre, on which *Blair Witch* draws heavily, has often been theorized as a distinctly male one that is underlined with sadism.[5] At first glance this would seem to account for the pleasures available. Theorists such as Peter Hutchings have argued that the genre is sadistic and masculinized,

> addressing specifically male fears and anxieties. The pleasure of horror […] involves the films compensation for feelings of inadequacy on the part of the male spectator, and this process is usually linked with the terrorization and/or killing of one or several female characters. (1993:84)

This sadistic pleasure is rooted in the processes of positioning that allow the (male) spectator to identify with the monster or killer who torments his (female) victims. This is often done in 'slasher' films through the convention of the I-camera, which *Blair Witch* activates (as shall be discussed), where the cinematic gaze is that of the killer; a handheld point-of-view shot that puts the audience in the sadistic position of the killer, exemplifying what Carol Clover calls the "assaultive gaze" (1992:212). She examines:

> the pleasure he [the male viewer] may take in the sadistic, voyeuristic side of horror - the pleasure he may take in watching, from some safe vantage or other, women screaming, crying, fleeing, cringing, and dying, or indeed the pleasure he may take in the thought of himself as the cause of their torment. (Clover, 1992:18)

This type of gaze invites identification with punishment, particularly the punishment of women. Robin Wood notes that, "women have always been the main focus of threat and assault in the horror film" (1987:81), where "teenagers are punished for promiscuity and the women are punished for being women" (1987:80). The horror genre is often criticized for this sadism directed towards women, assuming that "the male pleasure in horror arises from feelings of mastery and power that it induces in the male spectator" (Hutchings, 1993:85). Theorist Susan Hayward also writes: "The psychological horror film and the massacre movies (also known as slasher movies) reveal, albeit in very different ways, a particularly vicious normalizing of misogyny" (1996:176).

In this study I intend to investigate *The Blair Witch Project* to examine to what extent its central investment is in sadism, especially in a film that, in its blurring of the boundary between reality and fiction, has been compared with snuff films. One reviewer writes: "in our personal opinion, it's pretty sick to market this as the actual footage of three people actually being stalked and killed – I mean, honestly, go find yourself a snuff film or hang out in slaughterhouses if that's what you're into" (www.tbwp.freeservers.com/faq-html#). Another critic identifies the film as, "designed to eke every ounce of real misery from its cast" (Taylor, 1999). The question then becomes: what pleasure is potentially offered by *Blair Witch*, and is this pleasure limited to sadism? To address this question, this study draws on contemporary film theory to examine the gratification offered at the level of spectator-text relations and what subject positioning may be at work. I will be paying particular attention to the film's deployment of the I-camera convention, arguably re-inventing it to possibly create new kinds of horror and pleasure. This essay also investigates how the I-camera, as used in the film, draws on the documentary, Cinéma Vérité tradition and how it subverts audience expectations, as well as what pleasure may be afforded by this. Lastly, as gender is so strongly foregrounded in both spectatorship and horror, I will explore the way that femininity is represented in the film and what potential pleasure this may offer. This is especially important as the monster is female. Robin Woods argues that the monster provides a site for the transgression of ideological norms, a discursive space where social taboos can be articulated. Most especially, he posits that the monster may signal contemporary ideological concerns. I will thus explore what concerns the Blair Witch be said to signal, and how they are tied up with gender (Woods as cited in Cowan, 1999). Tania Modleski, having identified horror as a space for opposition, as discussed previously, notes that whilst horror may be seen as politically subversive, it can also teach us about the limits of this position. She points out that whilst conventional pleasure is attacked by horror and high art, it is significant that it is usually personified as a female deity. She points out that woman is frequently associated with mass culture, with the "feminization of American culture" (Anne Douglas as cited in Modleski, 1986:163). She goes on to say that the attack on pleasure is carried through to horror, embodied in the attack on the woman:

> the female is attacked not only because, as has often been claimed, she embodies sexual pleasure, but also because she represents many aspects of the specious good. (Modleski, 1986:163)

Thus, whilst horror has the potential to be politically destabilizing at the level of gender

politics, horror still tends to be extremely conventional. I will be examining to what extent *Blair Witch* provides new spaces for gendered subjectivity. If indeed the film may be regarded as a redefining moment of horror, does it also provide a space for the re-imagination of gender positioning?

Chapter2:
The I/Eye of Horror - Spectatorship and Vision

"I'm scared to close my eyes … I'm scared to open them"
(Heather Donahue, *The Blair Witch Project*)

With regards to the question of pleasure, *The Blair Witch Project* is first and foremost a visual medium, which brings with it the pleasures inherent in motion pictures. Thus, the question needs to be posed: what satisfaction is afforded the viewer by mainstream narrative cinema itself? In this chapter I will be examining *Blair Witch*, drawing on contemporary psychoanalytic film theory surrounding spectatorship and the desire to see, a pleasure that *Blair Witch* foregrounds. Through its visual style, the characters' direct address to the camera and conversation surrounding its presence throughout the film, the audience is constantly aware of their own complicity in seeing, highlighting one of the major preoccupations of the horror genre: that of vision and the eye. Carol Clover points out: "Horror privileges eyes because, more crucially than any other kind of cinema, it is about eyes. More importantly, it is about eyes watching horror" (Clover, 1992:167). This foregrounding assertion corresponds with Bruce Kawin's assertion that the problem of vision is a recurring theme in the horror genre, especially since the reliability and value of what is seen is linked to the possibility of threat, making vision urgent because it is connected to survival (1987:103). One need only think of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, a classic example of the horror genre, that foregrounds the gaze and develops the theme of sight.[1]

Vision and spectatorship was taken up by film theory in the 1970s as theorists moved away from the limitations of structuralism and began to consider the spectator-screen relationship. By drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan, theorists sought to explain how cinema works at the level of the unconscious; satisfying the desire to look and providing visual pleasure through unconscious processes that involved the acquisition of sexual difference. Christian Metz draws from Lacan's notion of the mirror phase in the development of subjectivity to sketch an analogy between the screen and the mirror. It is through the mirror phase, Lacan argues, that the subject leaves the Imaginary and enters the Symbolic realm, passing through the unconscious processes that are involved in the acquisition of sexual difference. Metz contends that film viewing is a regression to

early infancy, repeating this process, providing pleasure and constructing the subject (Hayward, 1996:290). However, whilst Metz's theories, as well as those of Raymond Bellour and Leo Baudry[2], broadened the framework for theoretical analysis around the question of vision, they soon came under fire from feminist critics.

In 1975 Laura Mulvey wrote a groundbreaking article, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1992), which, at the time, became the most pervasive and influential theory about mainstream narrative cinema. Tania Modleski has even suggested that the article "may be considered the founding document of psychoanalytic film theory" (1990:58). Mulvey challenged the theories of Metz, criticizing them as merely assuming a subject positioned as male, Mulvey sought to uncover the way in which the unconscious of patriarchy is bound up in film's form; how pleasure in looking and ways of seeing are structured by the dominant, phallocentric ideology. Mulvey's article draws on the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to demonstrate that gender and sexual difference lie at the heart of film spectatorship and identification, examining "the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle" (1992:746).

Mulvey examines a number of possible pleasures at work in cinema. The first is scopophilia, where looking itself, particularly in a controlling sense, is pleasurable. Freud argues that scopophilia is a function of the sexual instincts and is associated with erotic looking: "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey, 1992:748). Freud initially attaches this to pre-genital auto-eroticism where the child is inquisitive about his/her body. This interest then becomes projected onto others as the child becomes curious about others and their private activities, wanting to see and know the personal and forbidden. This intermediate phase can continue into adult sexuality, developing into a perversion, voyeurism, where the subject's sexual satisfaction comes from "watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other" (Mulvey, 1992:748). Mulvey argues that scopophilia (pleasure in looking and voyeurism, pleasure in controlling the other through looking) is at work in mainstream film and its conventions. In the cinema the viewer is given a sense of omnipotence, separated from the screen, and from the other viewers, in the dark, looking into a private world that reproduces metaphorically the 'secret', objectifying gaze of the voyeur. Mainstream film seldom draws

attention to its production or to the viewer's complicity in viewing the film, effacing the means of representation. Instead it aims to give the impression that it is "a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy" (Mulvey, 1992:749).

The second pleasure Mulvey explores is the pleasure and fascination of recognition and likeness, "scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect" (1992:749). She relates this to Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror phase in which the child's first glimpse and recognition of himself in a mirror moves him away from the Imaginary and illusory unity with the mother, to a recognition of the difference from the mother and into an illusory identification with the self. This is a misrecognition at heart, since the child imagines the reflection to have more control, be more perfect than the child experiences his/her own body to be. Theorist Barbara Creed elaborates on this: "the child perceives it's own body as a unified whole in an image it receives from outside the self: Identity is an imaginary construct, formed in a state of alienation, grounded in misrecognition" (1993:29). Mulvey argues that it is this mirror phase, this formation of identity, which is alienated and 'imaginary', that allows the subject future identification with screen surrogates**.** Just as the child is able to identify with the child in the mirror, so the mechanisms are set in place for the spectator to identify with the figures on the screen. Mulvey suggests that this identification entails the temporary loss of the subject's autonomy, but the structures of visual fascination are strong enough to allow this (1992:749).

Mulvey identifies how these two seemingly contradictory processes, the separation of voyeurism and the merging of the ego through identification, work together, organized by phallocentrism and sexual difference. According to Mulvey, it is the women on screen who are submitted to this voyeuristic, controlling gaze, especially as women have traditionally been constructed by patriarchy as 'to-be-looked-at', displayed as passive sexual objects for the male gaze.[3] These women function as both the erotic object for the spectator and erotic object for the male characters within the story. Men, on the other hand, have conventionally been encoded as the active gazers and, as Mulvey points out, "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" (Mulvey, 1992:751). Hence, the male protagonist becomes the figure the male spectator identifies with; he is the bearer of the look. Through

identification with the active, controlling screen surrogate and the spectator's own voyeuristic gaze, the male spectator is able to achieve a pleasurable sense of control and omnipotence.

A binary emerges in mainstream film viewing: female/passive and male/active, with voyeurism as a distinctly male pleasure. Several theorists have acknowledged this genderization of the cinema. Mary Ann Doane points out, "The woman's relation to the camera and the scopic regime is quite different from that of the male" (Doane, 1990:43). Linda Williams (1989) elucidates this point, tracing how some of the earliest moving images of human bodies already exhibited this binary of activity and passivity. She examines Eadweard Muybridge's second pictorial study of human movements, Animal Locomotion, made in 1887, and notes that already there was a marked difference in the representation of men and women. Both genders were shown performing everyday tasks, but the women appearing in the films were invariably self-conscious in performance and had details added: some superfluous, like a handkerchief or cigarettes; others more marked, such as a narrative. Williams writes,

> the sexuality already culturally encoded in women's bodies feeds into a new cinematic power exerted over her whole physical being. (Williams, 1989:39)

However, Williams would argue that Mulvey assumes the desire for these visual pleasures is already embedded in the viewing subject. Williams instead argues that voyeurism is a result of film as a social apparatus which implants and normalizes these ways of seeing. Film theorist Steven Shaviro agrees that this objectification of women's bodies is not a result of phallocentrism: instead it may be understood "not as a transcendental structure, but as a historically specific way of distributing gender roles and normalizing and regulating desire - that is a consequence of particular technologies of power, among which the mechanisms of cinema must be included" (Shaviro, 1993:22).

Mulvey goes on to further complicate the passive/active binary and specifically coded way of looking by demonstrating that women are not only objects of desire, of pleasurable looking, but also pose a deeper threat of unpleasure. According to Freudian theory, women stand as 'lack' in relation to patriarchy, as they lack the phallus**.** It is through the male child's first glimpse of his mother's genitals that he enters the symbolic realm, realizing the fact of sexual difference. This first glimpse is terrifying for the child, who, noticing the lack of genitals, fears the mother has been

castrated and he, therefore, begins to fear his own castration. The image of woman is thus pleasurable, but also threatens to remind the male spectator of the possibility of castration. Mulvey writes that the woman:

> also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. Ultimately the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of penis as visually ascertainable, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. (Mulvey,1992:753)

Therefore, Mulvey posits, this threat must be countered and she suggests two avenues of escape for the male spectator: investigation and punishment or fetishism. Investigation and punishment centres around voyeurism and, according to Mulvey, has associations with sadism. Here the pleasure comes from investigating and demystifying the woman, watching her in an active, controlling way, ascertaining her guilt (associated with castration) and punishing her both visually and narratively, thus negating her threat. The second suggestion, fetishistic scopophilia, involves the disavowal of the castration by substituting a fetish object in its place and building up its beauty into something pleasurable in itself. Here an object becomes sexually appealing as it disavows the woman's lack "which the little boy once believed in and in which he still wants to believe" (Williams, 1989:40).

Visual pleasure in mainstream film, according to Mulvey, is ordered by sexual difference, a difference that is not innate or historically contingent: instead spectatorship is a distinctly male pleasure centred on identification with the male protagonist and the voyeuristic and sadistic punishment of women. Thus, one must ask, to what extent does *Blair Witch* bear out these assumptions? To what extent is the pleasure in the film active and controlling, omnipotent, distanced from the action, assuming a masculine spectator? Does *Blair Witch* provide such sadistic, voyeuristic pleasure? Or are there other pleasures at stake for the spectator in watching the film?

The horror genre has been criticized as being a predominantly male domain, especially since horror is seen as tied up with control and vision. More than just judging and escaping threat, vision in horror is intimately tied to knowledge, with vision equalling knowledge and, ultimately, control. Vision and power are connected in horror, underlying the need to see and control. This control is pleasurable, as Robin Wood suggests, because: "The drive to understand and by

understanding to dominate experience must always represent one of the deepest human needs" (Wood, 1986:46).[4] This conflation of sight and power further entrenches the active, sadistic male gaze, a gaze that has been literalized by a convention which Carol Clover terms the 'I-Camera'. This is the use of the shaky, handheld point-of-view shot which has come to connote the gaze of the killer. As Barbara Creed describes it, the slasher film is: "marked by the recurrent use of the point-of-view or subjective shot taken from the shot of the killer. This is not followed by a typical reverse shot; the identity of the killer frequently remains unknown until the very end" (1993:125). The 'I-Camera' has become a convention that, as Fischer and Landy point out, involves the audience in a guessing game surrounding when and where the killer will strike (1987:88), becoming an entrenched part of audience expectation.

The killer's presence is not all that audiences have come to expect. The 'I-Camera' has also come to connote a vicious attack that will be witnessed from the killer's point-of-view, which has become the audience's point-of-view. Conventionally the shaky, handheld gaze will watch the next victim, building tension until the gaze leaps out, the camera rushing toward the victim as they turn in terror, looking directly into the camera. The camera will flail at them as a weapon comes down and bloodily kills them.

Many theorists argue that it is through this subjective camera that we are allied with the killer and take pleasure in the sadistic enactment of this act. Leffler suggests that horror satisfies, "audience craving for sensation by depicting crime, abnormal behaviour and extreme violence" (2000:57), whilst Dillard agrees that horror film's "open-eyed detailing of human taboos, murder and cannibalism has much to do with its success […] offers a particularly vivid opportunity to commit the forbidden deed vicariously" (1987:15). Vera Dika criticizes the use of the 'I-camera' for not implicating the viewer in this violence. She argues that because the structure of identification in the stalker film allows the viewer to identify with the killer's look, but not with his character, the viewer has no sense of the killer's emotional or psychological motivations and the spectator is able to experience their violence without the intrusion of morality (1987:88).

> The spectator is allowed to participate in this kind of involvement, but, because of the structure of identification, is freed from sharing the emotional or moral implications of this act. The spectator's moral identification is instead reserved for the heroine of the film. (Dika,1987:89)

Thus it is suggested that the viewer is able to find pleasure in vicariously committing violence, but their own complicity is ignored as 'safeguarded' through ostensible identification with the heroine, and consequently the moral high ground.

What is important to note, is that the 'I-camera', besides being violent and sadistic, is also identified as being predominantly male. Clover refers to the 'I-camera' as "a predatory, assaultive gaze […] a phallic gaze" (1992:173). Clover says that it is clear that the 'I-camera' is gendered 'male', even though, she argues, the monsters/killers are themselves feminized. For example, the monster tends to be sexually dysfunctional, with the gaze becoming the phallic substitute for the lack of sexual power: "men who cannot perform sexually, they stare and kill instead" (1992:186). Horror places this gaze as omnipotent, controlling and sadistic, being able to kill and maim vicariously, particularly women victims.

> Robert Ebert points out, the influence of the slasher film has led to an increasing use of the subjective camera to encourage the spectator to identify with the viewpoint of the anonymous killer which Ebert describes as a 'non-specific male killing force'. (as cited in Creed, 1993:125)

This takes voyeurism to the next level, Susan Sontag argues: "that the act of photography is an act of power, aggression, predatoriness, and sexual voyeurism. 'To photograph people is to violate them … to photograph someone is a sublimated murder … The act of taking pictures is a semblance of rape'" (as cited in Clover, 1992:177). However, the 'I-Camera' intensifies this conception. Not only does the gaze have power over the object conceptually, committing symbolic murder and rape, the 'I-Camera' extends this gaze to a physical force that kills and violates the objectified victim.

> Horror movies are obsessively interested in the thought that the simple act of staring can terrify, maim or kill its object – that a hard look and a hard penis (chainsaw, knife, power drill) amount to one and the same thing. (Clover, 1992:182)

Horror is thus criticized as giving viewers pleasurable access to explicit taboo and violence in order that this desire be satiated. This is particularly true of violence against women, which would seem to bear out the idea that horror normalizes misogyny and that the pleasure of horror lies in sadistic, voyeuristic control.

The Blair Witch Project would seem to activate the convention of the 'I-Camera' as it employs the shaky, hand-held camera style with the subjective point-of-view (although in the next chapter I will be examining the overlap between this convention and a documentary aesthetic). Does the fact

that the gaze is not that of the killer, but of the victims, lessen the possibility for sadistic pleasure? I would argue that the audience is privy to the students' intimate moments, most especially to their terror and it is through this gaze that we watch them tormented and murdered, which has given rise to several critics likening the film to a 'snuff' movie.[5] The question then remains, is sadism the only possible pleasure offered by the film? If this pleasure, as has been discussed, is a predominantly male one, what pleasure is available to the female spectator?

The overlooking of the female spectator in the concept of the male gaze is something that Mulvey herself sought to rectify later in her 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure' (1989) in which she searches for a position for the female spectator besides merely masochistically identifying with the objectified, punished woman. She looks to Freud's assertion that heterosexual femininity emerges from an active, phallic phase that is regarded as masculine. Freud argues that women have to repress this phallic phase in order to take up 'correct', passive femininity, which he believes is difficult for women. Because women have already had to switch gender identification at this stage, Mulvey posits that later trans-gender identification, switching between the masculine and feminine positions, is thus "second nature" to the female spectator. A spectator who, through the 'masculine' gaze of the cinema and identification with the male protagonist, is able to find pleasure in rediscovering this repressed aspect of her sexual identity, identifying at the same time with both the masculine and feminine positions. However, this still assumes the overall 'masculinization' of the spectator, with phallocentric mechanisms of seeing still assuming a male spectator. As Teresa de Lauretis writes, "the female spectator is always caught up in a double desire, identifying at one and the same time not only with the passive (female) object, but with the active (usually male) subject" (Modleski, 1990:59).

The idea of the fluidity of female spectator positioning has been criticised by theorist Jackie Stacey, amongst others, who says this relegation of women's pleasure either to masochism or sadistic exercise of power on her own likeness leaves no space for subjectivity, and fails to account for the fact that it is still women's desire which is punished and controlled. Gender, in this conception, is understood to be a rigidly controlling dichotomy of masculine/feminine and active/passive that leaves no space for individual subjectivity and presumes gender identifications to be pre-determined. Theorist Tania Modleski agrees that the representation of women and desire

in the cinema is more complicated than posited by Mulvey. Modleski writes, “the experience of the female spectator is bound to be more complex than a simple passive identification with the female object of desire or a straightforward role-reversal – a facile assumption of the transvestite’s garb” (1990:63). The alternative to this conception, Stacey suggests, is to examine how different viewer subjectivities, and therefore different responses brought to the text, interact to create pleasure. She draws on Mary Anne Doane’s argument that women’s pleasure is not based on fetishistic and voyeuristic drives to argue that “identification and object choice may be shifting, contradictory, or precarious” (Stacey, 1990: 357).

Doane’s argument is that whilst the voyeur needs to maintain a distance between himself and the image, between desire and object, this gap is negated for the female spectator since she *is* the image. For the woman viewer there is no castration to disavow and no phallus to represent through fetishism, no imagined ‘lack’ to control and punish through the voyeuristic gaze.

> This body so close, so excessive, prevents the woman from assuming a position similar to the man’s in relation to signifying system. For she is haunted by the loss of loss, the lack of that lack so essential for the realization of the ideal of semiotic systems. (Doane,1990:46)

Therefore, according to Doane, women are positioned differently in relation to visual pleasure. They can either assume the “masochism of over-identification” (1990:54), or instead take up a narcissistic position, becoming the object of their own desire. This proposition opens up a space to challenge Mulvey’s theory, which, although it endeavoured to work against patriarchal structures, has since come to be seen as monolithic. Subsequent study has uncovered that Mulvey does not account for women’s pleasure outside mere ‘masculinization’ and still only offers marginality for women and the fixity of the male spectatorial position in return.

Stacey maintains that theorists need to envision a model that “displaces the notions of spectator positions produced by the text [and focus] on the gaps and contradictions within patriarchal signification, thus opening up crucial questions of resistance and diversity” (1990:369). To do this, she claims, theorists need to separate gender identification from sexuality in order to account for variations in spectator’s desire across a wide spectrum. For example, Mulvey’s conception of spectatorship makes no allowance for homosexual desire on the part of the spectator. Stacey goes on to say that instead of the rigid distinction between genders, and between desire and

identification, held up by psychoanalysis, cinematic theory must find a paradigm that addresses an interplay of the aforesaid desire and identification.

Feminist psychoanalytic film theory may begin to address what pleasures may be available to women watching *The Blair Witch Project*: female pleasure might perhaps lie in homosexual desire or masochistic identification with the women being killed, or even a sadistic alignment with the killer. Or, perhaps, all of these positions simultaneously. However, whilst the mobility of female positioning has been addressed, many theorists still assume the restriction of the male audience to a "single, dominant position" (Modleski, 1990:66). Theorist Tania Modleski (1990) criticises this oversight and instead argues that men are not restricted to a sadistic position, but may also be feminine, passive and masochistic. She contends that all spectators are capable of trans-gender identification, not just women, as Mulvey insists, and thus multiple identifications are open to men as well. Modleski opens up the question of a 'feminine' vision of spectatorship in which the male spectator is placed in a masochistic, passive position. She draws on the theorist Kaja Silverman to argue that men identify not only with the powerful male characters, but, perhaps, also with the passive, victimized female characters too. This will be examined at length later in this study when I investigate the possible identification open to male spectators with Heather, the female protagonist, and how this has become a convention which *Blair Witch* manipulates.

What is interesting about this argument for the mobility of male spectatorial positioning is the way it problematizes these theories and opens up new avenues of investigation for examining what make a film such as *The Blair Witch Project* pleasurable. It is this conception of the masochistic pleasures of spectatorship, for both men and women that I will further explore. As Linda Williams says, "sadism – and the related perversions of voyeurism and fetishization of woman as object – may not be the whole 'story'" (1989: 205).

Film theorist Steven Shaviro, instead of seeing film spectatorship as based on voyeurism and sadism, examines the possibility that the process of film viewing itself is masochistic at heart. Rejecting Lacanian and Freudian notions of 'lack', 'phallus' and 'castration' that have underlined most film theory since Mulvey, Shaviro instead argues for a more passive positioning of the film viewer, whatever the gender. This is an interesting model because, by not applying the Oedipal

drama, women are not automatically relegated to 'lack', positioned outside the Symbolic. Jane Gaines writes:

> Terry Lovell sees the psychoanalytic notion of the subject as having 'deeply pessimistic' implications for women, because 'an account of sexed identity which locates the constitution of women in processes so massively concentrated in the first few years of life more or less completed with the resolution of the Oedipus complex, is to place women … under a crippling burden of determination in an epoch of their lives in which they have the least possibility of control and change. (1990:79)

Many critics have argued that such extensive reliance on psychoanalysis merely re-inscribes oppression and repression of women in society. As Linda Williams argues, "Psychoanalysis itself should not be regarded as the key to understanding the cinematic apparatus; instead, like the camera itself, it should be seen simply as another later nineteenth century discourse of sexuality" (1989:46). Steven Shaviro heartily agrees with this standpoint, arguing that Mulvey, whilst trying to challenge phallocentric logic, "ended up constructing an Oedipal, phallic paradigm of vision that is much more totalising and monolithic than anything the films she discusses are themselves able to articulate" (1993:12). Shaviro thus rejects Mulvey's model of spectatorship, but works within Metz's semiotic/psychoanalytic model to challenge theories of control and mastery.

Shaviro argues that much of the purpose of film theory itself is to deny how visual forms affect and move the viewer, and that theory manifests "a barely contained panic […] It is as if there were something degrading and dangerous about giving way to images, and so easily falling under their power" (1993:14). This panic, he says, comes from the fear and distrust of images that are vacuous and insubstantial, mere projections separated from their real situations. He posits that since Plato, the response to the projected image has been an almost hegemonic fear of its illusion. As Kaja Silverman says, "Film theory has been haunted since its inception by the spectre of a loss or absence at the heart of cinematic production, a loss which both threatens and secures the viewing subject" (as cited in Shaviro, 1993:16). As Shaviro himself says:

> The image is not a symptom of lack, but an uncanny, excessive residue of being that subsists when all *should* be lacking. It is not the index of something that is missing, but the insistence of something that refuses to disappear. Images are banally self-evident and self-contained, but their superficiality and obviousness is also a strange blankness, a resistance to the closure of definition, or to any imposition of meaning. (1993:17)

The fear of these images is compounded, Shaviro says, because, although absent, they still have 'reality effects', the ability to move us, emotionally and physically. One only has to listen to

people talk about their film viewing experiences, 'It brought tears to my eyes', 'It made me laugh until my sides hurt', or in horror films that make audience members scream and jump involuntarily, to realise that these filmic images are able to affect us. Film, Shaviro says, "offers an immediacy and violence of sensation that powerfully engages the eye and the body of the spectator" (1993:26): we respond viscerally to these images. This is especially true of the horror genre, whose aim is often to "scare the shit out of us". "Horror shares with pornography the frankly avowed goal of physically *arousing* the audience" (Shaviro, 1993:101). Peter Hutchings agrees: "Horror cinema can be characterised by what it does to its audience, that is, by the way in which it works on the body of the spectator" (1993:85). Horror aims to thrill us, make us jump, scream, give us goose-bumps. William Paul suggests that the 'scare' horror tries to bring about "denotes a special kind of pleasure that derives from disruption, an abrupt challenge to the nervous system" (1994:6). Peter Hutchings writes: "Many horror films are in fact marketed in terms of the physical sensations that they promise (or threaten) to induce in the spectator […] Horror then can be understood as an experience of subjection, of having things done to you by particular films" (1993:86). Indeed, part of the extra-textual myth surrounding *The Blair Witch Project* itself are the reports of theatregoers who literally vomited during the film, "Dizzy spells, queasiness, cold sweats and occasional vomiting have been part of the experience of seeing the film" (The Spike Report, 1999).[6] Shaviro says that the concept of film viewing as controlling, sadistic and omnipotent is an attempt to deny the thrall and affect of images. "Film theory endeavours to subdue and regulate the visual, to destroy the power of images, or at least to restrain them within the bounds of linguistic discursivity and patriarchal law" (Shaviro, 1993:16).

Instead of the controlling gaze, the spectator is "assaulted by a flux of sensations […] violently, viscerally affected" (1993:32) by these images. Whilst Mulvey posits the controlling distance of voyeurism, Shaviro argues that this distance is broken down, as the image is one that "violently impinges on me, one that I can no longer regard, unaffected from a safe distance" (1993:46). For Shaviro, cinema viewing is the opposite of mastery. The viewer has no control: instead their own fascination, like a deer in headlights, holds them in thrall to these images that, whilst manifestly unreal, still affect and hold the viewer. Shaviro even likens the process of cinematic viewing to contagion, the "infectious, visceral contact of images" (1993:53), or to "a form of captivation […] automation" (1993:49). He writes, "I do not have the power over what I see […] it is more that I

am powerless not to see" (1993:48). Instead of mastery, the gaze is submissive. Theorist Carol Clover identifies a sense of passivity in even Christian Metz's analysis of the process of vision as he talks about it being

> deposited within me […] 'projected' on to my retina […] arriving at last as our perception, which is now soft wax and no longer an emitting source […] 'deposited' in the spectator's perception. (Clover, 1992:208)

This echoes the idea that instead of active, the gaze is radically passive, a soft wax that is soft and yielding, powerless against the images that are imprinted on it.

Shaviro goes so far as to say that this vision itself is "the suffering of a violence perpetuated against the eye" (1993:51), where the gaze is disempowered, opening up a space of obscenity in which the viewer may even be forced to see "that which is intolerable to see" (1993:55). It is not only the images that are assaultive, Kaja Silverman would argue, but the cinema itself. Similarly, Tania Modleski identifies the pain inherent in cinema in her discussion of Freud's analysis of his grandson's 'fort/da' game, in which the child has an object that he throws away from him. In so doing, giving up an object that gives him pleasure, he experiences unpleasure, which is countered when the object is restored to him. The child repeats this game of loss and recovery which, Freud says, illustrates how "the individual learns to take pleasure in pain and loss" (Modleski, 1990:68). Similarly, Roy Schafer locates masochism, pleasure in pain, in the child's fear of being abandoned by the mother: an abandonment which the child acts out in fantasies, in which the child "obsessively recreates the movement between concealment and revelation, disappearance and appearance, seduction and rejection" (as cited in Studlar, 1985:606). Silverman argues that the filmic image is similar to this masochistic process of loss and replacement, in which the image, which inspires fascination and pleasure, is violently torn away with each 'cut' of the edit. Just as the masochist takes pleasure in loss, so the viewer takes pleasure in the unpleasure of the loss of the image. Therefore, says Silverman, there is "a constant fluctuation between the imaginary plenitude of the shot, and the loss of that plenitude through the agency of the cut" (as cited in Modleski, 1990:68). Thus, the process of tearing each shot away violently through the edit is also an 'assault against the eye'. Shaviro echoes this when he asserts that, "the continual metamorphoses of sensation pre-empt, slip and slide beneath and threaten to dislodge all the comforts and stabilities of meaning" (1993:33), as the image constantly changes, unable to be arrested by the eye.

Taking this passivity and violence against vision into account, Shaviro says a new approach to viewing is needed, one that does not emphasise sadism and separation, but, above all, masochism and abjection. As Shaviro say, cinema spectatorship is the opposite of mastery, "it is rather a forced, ecstatic abjection before the image" (1993:51).[7] Film spectatorship, according to Shaviro, does not reinforce the subject's ego, satisfying a desire for "unity and coherence" (Williams, 1989:44) through identifying with an ego ideal and a sense of voyeuristic omnipotence. Instead, he imagines film as undermining the stability of the subject. He argues that cinema takes the viewer into a place of passivity and uncertainty where the ego is under threat of being affected, swept away by the power the image has over the viewer. It, "dissolves the contours of the ego and transgresses the requirements of coherence and closure" (Shaviro, 1993:54). Shaviro argues that it is in this abject space that pleasure in the cinema can be found, that the cinematic spectator is inspired by "that very loss of control, that abjection, fragmentation and subversion of self-identity" (1993:60). He goes on to say that instead of identification and objectification, pleasure can be linked to the destruction of these very things, to the undermining of a subjective stability.

> I enjoy this sordid spectacle only at the price of being mimetically engulfed by it, uncontrollable, excitedly swept away. I find myself giving in to an insidious, hidden, deeply shameful passion for abject self-disintegration. (Shaviro, 1993:103)

Shaviro is arguing for a positive reading of this abjection and masochism of the image, cinema as a space for the subject to encounter such abjection, a technology for "intensifying and renewing experiences of passivity and abjection" (1993:65).

This conception is an interesting one in our quest for understanding pleasure in *The Blair Witch Project*. By questioning sadistic, voyeuristic control and distance, Shaviro opens up more questions about the nature of pleasure in film. Not only does it reject gendered positioning through objectification and identifications, but it also questions film theory's 'man-centred vision' by assuming all spectators to be passive. This will be an especially interesting consideration later in this chapter when I look at how *Blair Witch* positions the viewer through its camera style.

Another theorist who questions the paradigm of voyeurism and sadism is Gaylyn Studlar (1985), whose conception of spectatorship further opens up questions of masochism, resonating well with Shaviro's writings. Unlike Shaviro, Studlar doesn't totally reject Freudian theory, but instead challenges the Oedipal model that is used in film theory. By focusing on spectatorship as being

primarily based in the pleasures of the pre-oedipal, Studlar too avoids reducing women to 'lack'. She argues that focusing exclusively on the male controlling gaze has reduced the field of questions theorists have asked about film viewing, and she thus sets out to challenge this dominant model. Studlar draws on Gilles Deleuze's 'Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty' (1971) to argue that masochism is an important model for unlocking cinematic pleasure that has been largely ignored by film theory.

According to Freud, masochism[8] is a perversion; a designation that "comprises all passive attitudes to the sexual life […] in its most extreme form the gratification is connected with the suffering of physical or mental pain at the hands of the sexual object" (Freud, 1930:22). Freud regards this perversion as a continuation of sadism, the "tendency to cause pain to the sexual object" (Freud, 1930:93), which has become directed inwards, towards the self. According to Freud, masochism arises from the Oedipal drama when the child experiences guilt for sexually desiring his mother, fearing his father will punish him with castration.[9] In order to avoid castration, placate the father and win his love, the child becomes passive. He fantasises about being beaten as punishment for his incestuous desire, but the beating itself becomes a substitute for that desire, lending the punishment "libidinal excitation" (Studlar, 1985:606). For Freud, sadism and masochism are co-existent and inseparable from each other, with their contrasting passivity and activity reflecting the bases of sexual life. As theorist Peter Hutchings suggests, "The correlation between the two terms of the pair is so close they cannot be studied in isolation either in their genesis or in any of their manifestations" (Hutchings, 1993:88).

Gilles Deleuze, however, challenges the notion that sadism and masochism are co-existent. He regards the two as working on autonomous planes that might complement, but never rely on each other. Deleuze, instead of focusing on the Oedipal, phallic phase emphasized by Freud, concentrates his studies on the pre-genital period of the development of the subject's sexual identity. He also disagrees with Freud in arguing that the mother, and not the father, is the primary figure in structuring masochism, and she is an authority in her own right. Deleuze posits that the mother is an ambivalent figure for the child during the oral period: she is both love object and controlling agent. Whilst unity with the mother is pleasurable and comforting for the child, the desire for this union, this fusion, also threatens the child's own separate, stable subjectivity. Thus,

"the pleasure associated with the oral mother is joined in masochism with the need for pain" (Studlar, 1985:606), as the child fantasizes about the ultimate symbolic reunion with the mother's body and re-infusion of the child's narcissistic ego with the mother's ideal ego. This fantasy, as the ultimate pleasure, would also mean the death of the child's ego, and thus death of subjectivity: a death which is recognized as "the fantasy solution to masochistic desire" (Studlar, 1985:606).

According to Deleuze's conception of masochism, the mother does not connote 'lack', but instead fullness for the child, possessing the breast and the womb which the child fantasizes about returning to. She is not passive and subjected to sadistic control, but rather fulfils all symbolic functions: nurturer, love object, original environment and agent of control. Here identification is not with the controlling male figure, but with the mother as a figure of power. The father in this theory is the one degraded as he fulfils none of these functions and even threatens to come between the mother and child. Whilst Freud sees this phase as important, in so much as it has to be overcome in the child's development, Deleuze perceives this bond as having a major influence throughout the subject's life.

Gaylyn Studlar uses this analysis to argue that film viewing itself replicates this relationship and the primal gaze. Carol Clover identifies the masochism in cinema as coming from the primal gaze in which the child witnesses/imagines his/her parents engaged in sexual intercourse, possibly even witnessing the moment of his/her conception.[10] This earliest, important gaze, is not active and controlling, but one in which the child is held captive, 'invaded' by adult sexuality (Clover, 1992:207). The viewing subject regresses to this non-differentiated state of mother/child, placing the viewer in the position of the oral child who wants to be controlled (1985:607). The "plenitude of the shot" (Modleski, 1990:68) is akin to what the child imagines as the plenitude of the womb.

> The spectator's narcissistic, infantile omnipotence is like the infantile omnipotence of the masochist, who ultimately cannot control the active partner. Immobile, surrounded in darkness, the spectator becomes the passive receiving object who is also subject. The spectator must comprehend the images, but the images cannot be controlled. (Studlar, 1985:613)

Instead of active mastery and control, Studlar too stresses the passivity and powerlessness of the spectator's position, a position where the spectator may imagine control over the images as in order to disavow "the loss of ego autonomy over image formation" (Studlar, 1985:614). This

reading of cinema as a regressive state of the undifferentiated ego is similar to that posited by Linda Williams as she quotes Baudry's discussion of visual pleasure:

> Like dreams and hallucinations, cinema facilitates a temporary regression on the part of the viewing subject to a psychically earlier, pre-oedipal mode of merger in which the separation between body and the world is not well-defined and in which 'representations' – whether conscious or of the film – 'are taken as perception'. (1989:44)

This temporary regression, says Williams, gives the spectator pleasure, satisfying the desire for unity and coherence. Studlar also locates the pleasure of cinema in masochistic unity that allows the spectator a pleasurable regression, to experience "infantile forms of object cathexis and identification normally repressed" (1985:615),[11] a pleasure in being able to experience the taboo, as well as being able to re-identify with the mother, a relationship that has to be repressed in the Symbolic order.

Studlar posits that this notion of spectatorship is important as it re-connects the structure of scopophilia to its earliest manifestations, to when visual pleasure was first experienced, thus allowing us to truly understand cinematic pleasure. This masochistic paradigm is also important as it re-conceptualizes the positioning of women; they are not thought of as 'lack' in this conception, but instead as controlling and all-powerful. This theory not only re-positions the conception of women spectators, but allows for more fluid gender identifications across sexual difference. By allowing re-identification with the mother, this also allows "gender mobility through identification" (Studlar, 1985:615) for male viewers as well. Whereas in most of the theories discussed the female position was mutable, but the male position fixed, this accounts for the male spectator being able to identify with female or feminized characters.

Thus Studlar's theory of spectatorship as a masochistic return to the oral phase is successful in its attempt to challenge the 'man-centred' conception of film theory, offering an alternative to the location of male pleasure in sadistic voyeurism and women's pleasure in masochistic identification. Her hypothesis allows the mobility of gender identification and opening up the questions one might ask surrounding pleasure in cinema. However, Studlar's work is not without complications.

Tania Modleski (1990) points out, whilst placing sole emphasis on the female as the figure of male identification, Studlar fails to fully analyse what it means for gender politics that this identification is

highly ambivalent, the mother "a source of dread" (Studlar, 1985:610), and the mother/child relationship one that has to be repressed. The relationship with the oral mother itself is marked by extreme ambivalence and the female figure of identification replicates this; the female "reflects the fantasy of the desiring infant who regards the mother as both sacred and profane, loving and rejecting" (Studlar, 1985:609). For whilst she is loved, she is also a threatening figure because she represents both attaining the ultimate desire, but also the threat of absorption and death. Thus, this figure is often associated with "the ideal of coldness, solitude and death" (Studlar, 1985:609), and is the "source of the deepest dread" (Studlar, 1985:610). This will become important in our next discussion when we begin to see how this oral mother has much in common with the archaic mother, the mother as 'ultimate abyss' and ultimate abjection. This is important because it could begin to help us understand, as Modleski writes, what the consequences of this ambivalence for the mother figure are for the representation of women might be. What does it mean when women are a source of dread and are equated with death?

Studlar draws on Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel who has suggestion that the devaluation of women stems not from any imagined castration, but from a defensive response to this ambivalent stage, this dread and love for the mother figure: "a pathological and defensive response to maternal power" (Studlar, 1985:610). It is important to note that whilst passivity and abjection may be a position for both genders to adopt in spectatorship, it is largely still only the women who are objectified and punished both narratively and through the gaze. As Modleski points out, although the viewer may be regressing to an earlier, pre-oedipal stage, they have still passed through the Symbolic. Perhaps, she suggests, it is important to understand how the oedipal and pre-oedipal, and the sadistic and masochistic phases interrelate in male spectatorship to create pleasure. Modleski writes:

> By acknowledging the importance of denial in the male spectator's response, we can take into account a crucial face ignored by the articles discussed – the fact that the male finds it necessary to repress certain 'feminine' aspect of himself, and to project these exclusively onto the woman, who does the suffering for both of them. (1990:69)

If *The Blair Witch Project* itself draws on this pre-Oedipal stage of masochism in positioning the viewer, it is important to question how this relates to the representation of women in the film, especially since the film centrally features a female monster, one who embodies the dread of women and abjection. In a later chapter I will be further examining gender in relation to horror to

explore the consequences of masochism as pleasure. For although both Shaviro's and Studlar's arguments supporting masochism in cinema viewing strive to challenge the relegation of women to 'lack', their objectification and punishment, both raise questions about sadism directed towards women. Whilst Shaviro posits 'abjection before the image' for both genders, this fails to account for the equation of powerlessness with 'femaleness'. This is especially apt in the horror genre, which, Carol Clover points out, is still regarded as a "feminine or feminising experience" (Clover, 1992: 217). Studlar too tries to counter phallocentric conceptions of spectatorship by exploring a masochistic aesthetic, but in doing so fails to account for the dread of women inherent in this approach, where women are seen as ambivalent, a threatening power to which the spectator is in thrall.

Although flawed, Studlar and Shaviro's theories do begin to envisage a pleasure that not only takes female spectatorial desire into account, but also begins to re-imagine the male spectator as being positioned as voyeuristic and sadistic. Does *The Blair Witch Project*, a film critics have aligned with sadism, also perhaps offer masochistic pleasure?

One way that *Blair Witch* may be said to align itself with masochism, is through its deployment of the 'I-Camera'. Although theorists such as Vera Dika may see the 'I-Camera' as embodying mastery and control, others have challenged this conception. Telotte, in his study of John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), suggests that instead of a voyeuristic distance, the first person camera violates the viewer's supposedly safe perspective by forcing them into a deeper sense of participation in the violence.

> By implicating his viewers in these terrors, therefore, by visually forcing them through a series of unsettling identifications, first as killer, then accomplice, and finally potential victim, Carpenter emphasizes the common human responsibility for and involvement in those grisly aspect of life from which we usually like to think ourselves safely removed. (Telotte, 1987:120)

Carol Clover, on the other hand criticizes the 'I-Camera' as being laughable, a convention that bears its own doom, especially in a genre where that gaze is eventually punished, where the look is turned back on the monster and it is defeated. She writes: "it is an inexorable law of horror that this vision must be extinguished and its bearer be punished and incapacitated" (Clover, 1992:189). Thus, concludes Clover, instead of arousing fear and being predatory, as originally intended, a spectator versed in the conventions of horror will be reassured by the 'I-Camera' as it signals that the killer

will be ultimately defeated.[12] However, according to Clover, it is the gaze itself which she sees as the 'I-Camera's' ultimate failure, undercutting any mastery through the gaze:

> the 'view' of the first-person killer is typically cloudy, unsteady and punctuated by dizzying swish pans. Insofar as an unstable gaze suggests an unstable gazer, the credibility of the first-person killer-camera's omnipotence is undermined from the outset. (1992:187)

Clover has gone so far as to wonder why critics have taken the 'I-Camera' seriously, since it offers such limited vision and is so obviously insufficient and silly. In the case of *The Blair Witch Project*, I would argue that it is the very instability of vision which makes the film's deployment of the 'I-Camera' such an effective reinvention of the convention.

Horror itself, as has been discussed, is often about seeing, especially seeing violence and taboo in painstaking detail. Yvonne Leffler argues that horror satisfies "audience craving for sensation by depicting crime, abnormal behaviour and extreme violence" (2000:37). However, while there may undoubtedly be pleasure in satisfying this craving, it is certainly not an easy pleasure. William Paul argues that there is a double impulse of both attraction and repulsion in seeing such taboo: "Horror always invokes this kind of ambivalent feelings, showing us what we presumably don't want to see – except we do and are even willing to pay for the pleasure" (1994:270). Horror itself is credited with being similar to gladiatorial combat and public executions, providing the audience with the experience of seeing, and coping with seeing, the repugnant and unpleasant (Leffler, 2000:57).

Several other theorists note that instead of straightforward sadism, the witnessing of violence in horror films is far more complicated. Carol Clover contends that, "the eye of horror works both ways. It may penetrate, but it is also penetrated" (1992:191). She argues that horror audiences are usually punished for their looking through both the narrative, which I will discuss in a later chapter, and the image itself. According to Clover, just as the audience may be invited to assault through the first-person camera, so they may also be assaulted by sudden flashes of light or violent movement, as well as by sudden, unforeseen images of violence (Clover, 1992:203). Similarly, Creed writes:

> the extreme moment of masochistic viewing seems to occur when the viewing subject, male and female, is forced to look away. The scene of horror is so terrifying, abject and confronting that the spectator cannot bear to look at all. Not even the look of the camera, which may have attempted to freeze the horrific image through fetishization or control it by maintaining a voyeuristic distance, is enough to entice the terrified viewer into snatching another glance. (Creed, 1993:154)

These moments, Creed suggests, puts the viewing subject's sense of unified self into crisis as they become too threatening or horrific. However, whilst the viewer, as Clover maintains, may "take it in the eye" (1992:180), there is often still pleasure in being able to see and through seeing, control and quantify the threat, turning it into an object.

I would argue that *The Blair Witch Project*'s effectiveness as a horror film comes not from punishing the audience's need to see by gratifying this desire to a painful level, but by showing almost nothing at all. The film relies on the conception that sometimes effective horror relies on indirect suggestion, leaving the terror in the audience's imagination. As William Paul contends:

> In other horror films, this visual reticence is often necessary as a way of keeping the horrible in horror. Full vision of the monster is often anticlimactic to the extent that the horrible requires obliqueness in order to defy our powers of conceptualization. The moment we can see it, we begin to find ways of categorizing it and, in doing so, render it an anodyne for anxiety. (1994:371)

However, in *Blair Witch*, the power of suggestion, although it may be used to build the film to a climax, instead of even indirectly showing the audience the witch, shows *nothing*. In most conventional horrors some idea would be given of what is chasing the students, or what happens to them. Beyond something bloody in a bundle which the viewer battles to make out, there is no gore and definitely no monster. Indeed, it is the very instability and limitation of the 'I-Camera', which Clover criticizes as being laughable, that makes *Blair Witch* so effective. The gaze of the camera is not only shaky and blurry, but also incredibly claustrophobic; the limiting vision intensified by the claustrophobia of the woods themselves.

Ultimately the 'I-Camera' in *Blair Witch* foregrounds voyeurism, as Deneka MacDonald argues: "voyeurism is not just a product of the film being a film, it is inherent in the film itself" (2002:4), but foregrounds it in such a way that the voyeuristic desire of both the student and the audience are ultimately punished. The students are punished for wanting to see the Witch, hunted and murdered and the viewer is punished by wanting to see, but having this desire completely thwarted. Through the exclusive use of the handheld camera, the film limits the frame of what the spectator can see, placing them in a position of uncertainty. This is especially important in a genre such as horror, where seeing and knowing are so important. Instead of the predominantly sadistic control that much of psychoanalytic film theory would support, *The Blair Witch Project* seems to open up a far more masochistic positioning. As Shaviro suggests, viewing this film is the opposite of mastery: instead, it

may even be seen to undermine the stability of the subject through, “intensifying and renewing experiences of passivity and abjection” (1993:65). Thus, the film would seem to open up the possibility of new areas of subjectivity through enunciating pleasures that are based in masochism, in perversity and its celebration.

Chapter 3:
Convention, Expectation and Subversion

When examining the possible pleasures that *The Blair Witch Project* may afford its viewers, one must bear in mind that the film exists in context with others, particularly others that fall into the same genre.[1] This becomes significant, as genre isn't merely a way of classifying films but, more importantly: "becomes part of a system that regulates desire, memory and expectation" (Neale as cited in Hayward, 1996:164). Genre is more than a recurring set of codes and conventions. It is intrinsic to the spectator-text relationship in the production of pleasure and meaning, especially through viewer expectation and hypothesis. As Andrew Tudor notes, "The notion that someone utilizes a genre suggests something about audience response. It implies that any given film works in such-and-such a way *because* the audience has certain expectations of a genre" (1976:122). This is particularly central in a film such as *The Blair Witch Project*, which started generating anticipation months before the film's release, using an extensive internet campaign and a 'documentary' around the Blair Witch. The film accentuates expectation and overtly draws on documentary and horror conventions. I wish to examine to what extent genre and expectation, and the subversion of expectations, can be said to play a part in generating pleasure.

Genres rely on both familiarity and innovation, working paradoxically to repeat formulas, but also shifting and modernizing conventions to keep audiences interested and active. I will argue that *The Blair Witch Project* has achieved such a shift in formula, re-inventing the horror genre through undercutting conventions and expectation. I intend to demonstrate that the film doesn't just deliver pleasurable innovation within the genre, but instead completely undermines this and destabilizes the viewer's sense of control. Arguably, the most important way *The Blair Witch Project* subverts expectation is through the documentary conventions it activates. As has been discussed, the camera work of the film, on one level, can be said to re-deploy the 'I-camera' convention of horror: however the film, I will argue, also replicates the aesthetic conventions of Cinéma Vérité.

The Cinema of Truth?

Cinéma Vérité was part of a documentary movement in the 1950s that advocated creating documentary through observing life as it unfolded. It was most recognizable for its aesthetic style, a style which *Blair Witch* mimics. The Vérité filmmakers followed their subjects without the benefit of set-up time or rehearsals, and the image would often go out of focus or become shaky, especially since setting up a tripod was often a luxury that the camera person did not have time for. This style became a conventional signifier for reality, testifying that 'they were there'. It also stood out because it contrasted heavily with the artificial, polished studio style of many fictional films during the 1950s. The filmmakers were "unconcerned if their images were grainy and wobbly and occasionally went out of focus; in fact, these 'flaws' in themselves seemed to guarantee authenticity and thus became desirable, eventually developing into an aesthetic in their own right" (MacDonald & Cousins, 1996:250). *Blair Witch* also uses the hand-held aesthetic in which the image is often framed incorrectly or out of focus. The film is shot on location and uses a variety of film formats, including grainy black and white 16mm film mixed with low resolution video and digital footage. Overall, this is an aesthetic which is intrinsically connected to Cinéma Vérité. One must now ask: what expectations are generated by the use of this documentary style and its conventions?

Documentary itself is a genre that has been connected to representing truth and reality.[2] Michael Renov notes the documentary is conceived as "an historically privileged domain of truth" (Renov, 1993:8), whilst Bill Nichols draws on William Sloane's definition that "The term documentary is used in its broadest sense to refer to films that posses truth and project reality" (as cited in Nichols, 1981:173). When watching documentary, generally people expect real stories and situations, and this notion of authenticity distinguishes the genre from other fictional genres. Nichols also notes that it is the expectation of accuracy and realism which documentary filmmakers draw on to make meaning, an expectation which is often seen as an obligation: "Documentary realism is not only a style but also a professional code, an ethic, a ritual" (Nichols, 1991:167). He sees documentary as a compact between text, producer, historical referent and viewer in which this code of veracity minimizes the audience's resistance or hesitation to the film's claims of transparency (Nichols,

1991:165). He argues that this understanding and expectation, on the part of the spectator, is often based on previous knowledge of and, thus, 'trust' in the genre's authenticity.

Expectations of 'truth' and 'reality' are especially true of the Cinéma Vérité movement in that one of its central aims was to film and re-present actuality without influencing it in any way,[3] mirroring reality without distortion or interpretation. Cinéma Vérité had, at its core, a commitment to 'truth' and to filming unmediated reality. Jean Rouch said, "it would be better to call it cinema sincerity … That is, you ask the audience to have confidence in the evidence, to say to the audience 'This is what I saw. I didn't fake it" (as cited in Minh-ha, 1993:95).[4] In time, the aesthetic of Vérité came to be associated with these same aims of presenting 'truth'. This mobile, 'flawed' camerawork became "some short-hand claim to authenticity" (Francke, 1996:341).[5] Stella Bruzzi notes that there is "an inverse relationship between style and authenticity: the less polished the film the more credible it will be found" (2000:2).

The Blair Witch Project consciously draws on this association of the Vérité style and 'truth'. Producers Greg Hale and Robin Cowie, in discussing the relationship between *The Blair Witch Project* and Cinéma Vérité say, "It's like a language that you inherit. It's a kind of language that is there" (Greg Hale, *Defining the Moment*, 1999). Greg Hale says:

> It's a whole history of cinema that led up to and made *Blair* possible. […] I mean, people now shoot Cinéma Vérité and watch Cinéma Vérité for every special family event they do and you get used to that aesthetic. That shaky, don't see everything, sometimes framed up wrong, means reality. (*Defining the Moment*, 1999)

Through its hand-held style, *Blair Witch* self-reflexively draws attention to the camera and the process of filming itself, a phenomenon heightened by the characters directly addressing the camera or discussing its presence in conversation. The irony is that usually, as Sonya Michel points out, "self-reflexive films continually interrogate themselves and undermine the grounds of their own credibility. By exposing their condition of production, such films demystify their origins and point to the filmmaker's role in the production of meaning" (1990:239). However, instead of destroying the illusion of the reality of the diegetic space and narrative, it is through the self-reflexivity of *Blair Witch* that 'authenticity' and 'reality' is implied all the more**.** As one Internet reviewer, Harry Knowles, wrote:

> The film is incredibly amateur. Every mistake that you would make the first time out with the camera. Shoddy camera work, erratic and terrible sound. Locked down shots and hand-held.

> No nice and smooth pans. Not a lot of B-roll. But you know what. That's what this is. It felt like a home video. As if I was watching somebody else's moments. (www.aint-it-cool-news.com)

Everything in this production was geared toward giving the impression of realism; on set the crew reportedly adopted a 'boot camp' approach. The actors, the three students, were given cameras, supplies and film stock and sent into the forest with a vague idea of the plot, but no specific details. They filmed the footage themselves, footage which was picked up at a drop point later and then viewed by the directing team to make plans for the next day's shoot. The dialogue was entirely unrehearsed, the actors merely reacting to stimuli that the producers would strategically place and perform, giving, what the DVD production notes call, "a raw, emotional texture". Producer Greg Hale reports going so far as to use army training techniques, wearing the actors down mentally and physically in order to short-circuit their logical thinking and heighten their realistic portrayal. He observes that, "The result shows their fear as primal" (DVD Production Notes, 1999).

Besides the use of Cinéma Vérité conventions within the film itself, the Producers also drew on documentary conventions in their publicity. This included a documentary, *The Curse of the Blair Witch* (1999), which was aired on prime time television before the film was released, a website (www.blairwitch.com) and a Dossier (Stern, 1999). All of these were supported by 'archival' documents, old letters and news clippings, as well as testimony from 'reliable' and 'respectable' sources, such as professors, detectives and the Burkitsville Sheriff; all of which was fabricated.

It is through the re-deployment of these conventions that *The Blair Witch Project*, a fiction, presents itself as 'fact', thus blurring the line between fiction and reality and undermining viewer expectations of the documentary genre. As Nichols writes, "our perception of the real is constructed for us by codes and conventions […] the conventions of documentary themselves guarantee the authenticity of that to which they refer" (1993:179). *Blair Witch* is precisely drawing on this perception of the real generated by Vérité conventions. What relationship does the undermining of this perception have to pleasure in the film?[6]

Blair Witch may, conceivably, be drawing attention to the complicity between text, producer and viewer within spectatorship itself. Mainstream Hollywood narratives seldom overtly challenge the

logic of the diegetic world or draw excessive attention to their construction. Instead, most films are like games: viewers know they are fictitious from the outset, but agree to suspend disbelief in order to engage emotionally with the narrative. Conventions are part of the agreed rules of this game. Noël Carroll argues that there is a sense of willing participation, a sense of a pact between filmmaker and viewer: "for the purpose of sustaining our pretence, we do not say it is pretence; that would undercut the game" (Carroll, 1990:73).[7] I would contend that it is precisely this pact that *Blair Witch* challenges, in a way similar to the 'cock and bull' story Carroll uses to elaborate his point: this is a story told to involve the listener emotionally, especially with pity or fear, but a story that the listener eventually discovers was untrue. When the listener is originally told the story and believes its veracity, he/she responds sympathetically. However, when they find they have been deceived, they no longer respond in the same way, instead resentment or embarrassment arises. Similarly, *Blair Witch*, perhaps, draws pity and fear from its audience when it presents itself as reality, only to have the audience discover its falsehood, leaving them with resentment and embarrassment, undermining the pleasure they might have taken in the film up to that point. Furthermore, *Blair Witch* might then be said to expose this pretence and draw attention to spectatorship itself. Of course this point would have only applied to viewers who had not been 'warned' by other viewers of the film's falsity.

More important still than undermining the relationship between producer, text and viewer, is the potential of the film, through the use of documentary conventions associated with 'reality' and 'truth', to destabilize the border between fiction and reality.[8] This blurring may be central to un-pleasure, or perverse pleasure, in the film. This is borne out by horror theorists Noël Carroll (1990) and Yvonne Leffler (2000) who argue that our enjoyment of the horror genre itself is grounded in the secure knowledge that it is fictional, a knowledge which *Blair Witch* seeks to undermine.

Here lies a paradox: if pleasure in horror is dependent on a pre-knowledge of the monster's fabrication, how can audiences be frightened of something that does not exist? Carroll sets out to address this question using analytic philosophy and film theory. He speculates that the emotion we feel whilst watching a horror film is not the same as that we would feel should the situation be real. It is not 'genuine' fear but "fictional or pretend fear" (Carroll, 1990:70); an emotion he terms 'art-horror' and sees as one of the identifying emotional responses of the audience to horror. Instead of

genuine fear, he says, the audience member is reassured that it is fiction and willingly agrees to suspend disbelief in order to become emotionally involved in the narrative.[9] They can therefore empathically rehearse these emotions, "to prepare oneself emotionally for the possibility of future situations by providing practice in responding to fictional ones" (Carroll, 1990:72). Carroll draws on Kendall Walton's argument that a contradiction exists at the heart of horror spectatorship: in order to experience the thrill and the pleasure, the audience must believe the character is in danger, but simultaneously they must know that it does not exist in order to mobilize the correct feelings of 'art-horror', so that they experience pleasurable 'pretend fear' and not real fear, which may be unpleasurable.[10] Indeed, Carroll says "A very condition of there being an institution of fiction from which we derive entertainment and pleasure is that we know that the person and events are not actual" (1990:64).[11]

Yvonne Leffler agrees with this assertion that fiction is central to our enjoyment of the genre and that this feeling is 'fictional fear'. Like Carroll, she argues that our response in horror films differs to those that would occur in reality. Leffler posits that this is because we are aware that it is a fiction and are thus able to maintain a 'safe distance' from the threat, consciously adopting a spectator position: "Our aesthetic pre-comprehension thus functions as a psychological buffer, in the sense that we can reduce our sense of involvement by reminding ourselves that what is engrossing our thoughts and feelings is not real, merely simulated" (Leffler, 2000:262). Leffler suggests that the pleasure in horror lies in its providing an emotional experience that is sufficiently intense to make the viewer forget themselves and their daily lives, but also regulating this experience through the reassurance the text is fiction and that they are in control of the situation. As an audience we can abandon ourselves, and "give free rein to our emotions within the given constraints and without any expectation of intervening in the plot ourselves or being exposed to actions taking place in the fictional world" (Leffler, 2000:255). As William Paul writes, horror is "an indulgence that takes place within a safe environment which permits us to acquiesce without fear of consequences" (1994:67). Leffler contends that through a symbolic and aestheticised encounter with fright, this unpleasant emotion is transformed into an enjoyable fictional feeling. She concludes: "The basis of the sensation of enjoyable fictional fear and fictional horror, and what distinguishes it from real-life fear and horror, is above all the audience's assumption that it is relating to fiction" (Leffler, 2000:260).

If the knowledge that a horror film is fiction is central to a spectator's ability to distance him/herself and derive enjoyment from the safety of 'art-horror', then this is the pleasure that *The Blair Witch Project* attempts to undermine. By using conventions that exploit (mis)conceptions surrounding documentary as a privileged domain of truth, the film subverts the audience's sense of security and distance. The suggestion is that the audience, thinking *Blair Witch* to be real, cannot mobilize the correct feelings of 'art-horror' and negates the "enjoyable combination of proximity and distance, an emotional adventure in circumstances of physical safety" (Leffler, 2000:264). Instead the film might be said to deny a 'safe distance' for aestheticised horror and instead open up a space of confusion and ambiguity. Steven Shaviro (1993) would argue that this distance is already negated by the images themselves, but, by blurring the boundary between fiction and reality, *Blair Witch* further undermines any sense the viewer might expect to experience of being active, in control and separated. With the blurring of this border the audience is delivered into a space of powerlessness and uncertainty, a state far more aligned with masochism than sadism. If thought of as reality, the film can no longer be something that is safely left behind in the theatre, instead it worries and disquiets even after the film is over. Yvonne Leffler suggests there is a trend in horror, "bringing the horror genre itself closer to other more realistic genres centered on criminality and crime solving" (Leffler, 2000:55), and *The Blair Witch Project* pushes this trend to its limits, and beyond.

Another impact that *Blair Witch's* use of documentary conventions and expectations might have relates to questions of violence and reality. If horror is necessarily centered around violence as, Gregory Waller (1987) suggests, then what is the effect on the viewer when this violence is no longer aestheticised, no longer cushioned by the knowledge that it is fictional? Linda Williams (1989) discusses how belief, fiction and violence interact in sadomasochistic pornography. She asks: if violence appears to be genuinely inflicted, then how do these films ask us to respond? To what extent is the audience asked to take sadistic pleasure in the real suffering of others? This question becomes central in *The Blair Witch Project*. Although we never see any overt violence in the film, it is inferred. If the audience is under the impression that it is a realistic representation, do they still vicariously enjoy breaking the social taboo against this kind of brutality? Does it in fact correspond to the pleasure some would take in a 'snuff film', a pornographic film in which someone is killed, a film type that *Blair Witch* has often been compared to? Is it this kind of

sadistic pleasure in violence that is invoked, or is it rather an uncomfortable experience for the viewer whose sense of boundaries are violated as they are forced to watch images that, without the comfort of the distance of fiction, are disturbing? Thus the blurring of the lines between fiction and reality would seem to allow the possibility of sadistic and masochistic responses to the film, perhaps even both.

Horror & Expectation

Besides the documentary genre, *The Blair Witch Project* also clearly bears the iconography of the typical 'slasher'[12]: it has teenage victims, a killer who stalks and kills them and a "Terrible Place" (Clover, 1992), namely the forest and the Witch's house.[13] These elements, amongst others, mark the film as clearly part of the horror film tradition: a tradition that, over the years, has built up definite expectations among audiences.

Numerous theorists have noted how prevalent generic codes and conventions are in horror. Carol Clover writes: "A strong prima facie case could be made for horror's being, intentionally or unintentionally, the most self-reflexive of cinematic genres […] horror talks about itself" (1992:168). Thus, horror-literate audiences are well-versed in the conventions and are usually able to speculate what is going to happen in the film. The question then becomes, with this pre-knowledge, why do audiences still go to view these films, and when they do, why do they still jump in their seats if they know what is coming? Linda Badley writes,

> Modern horror has a 'violent awareness' of its saturation as a genre, as Philip Brody says. It 'knows that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know. And none of it means a thing, as the cheapest trick will still tense your muscles, quicken your heart and jangle your nerves'. When the pleasure of the text is horror, only the phenomenal present counts. Horror film does not deny its clichés; it overplays them, creating an undercurrent. (1995:5)[14]

This saturation is evident not only in the intensive investment in conventions, but also in the repetition of stories and sequels. Carol Clover asserts that, instead of predictability, the endless replication of stories and conventions are, "organized around the experience of fear, and that this conjunction – scar stories endlessly repeated – stands as a narrative manifestation of the syndrome of repetition compulsion (*wiederhoungszwang*)" (Clover, 1992:213). Clover defines this as: "an ungovernable process originating in the unconscious whereby a person 'deliberately places himself in distressing situations, thereby repeating old [but unremembered] experiences' " (Freud as cited

in Clover, 1992:213). Thus she is suggesting that the pleasure of horror lies in the repetition of unpleasant experience[15] and, is thus, centrally invested in pain and masochism.[16] Drawing on director William Friedkin, Clover goes so far as to suggest that audience's emotional engagement with a film, particularly horror, begins while they are still standing in line, with the build up of expectation which is gratified within the film's reiteration of story 'types' and conventions.

Horror's appeal lies precisely in the way it repeats stories and conventions, especially in the way a particular example delivers a cliché. As critic Andrew Britton, on observing a horror film audience, notes:

> The film's total predictability did not create boredom or disappointment. On the contrary, the predictability was clearly the main source of pleasure, and the only occasion for disappointment would have been a modification of the formula, not the repetition of it. (as cited in Clover, 1992:9)

Yvonne Leffler concurs with this assertion that the saturation of convention is an intrinsic pleasure in horror viewing, an experience which can "be likened to an enjoyable game played with the well-known conventions of the genre" (Leffler, 2000:264). However, her conception of this pleasure is not tied into masochistic repetition compulsion, but rather to control and distance that is based on an intellectual and aesthetic engagement rather than one invested in pain. For Leffler, the audience's pre-knowledge is not damaging to their pleasure, but a requirement for emotional engagement with the plot and the fate of characters as viewers know, to some extent, what will happen and can thus control their engagement.[17] Leffler argues that specific to horror is an "anticipatory reading" (2000:177) in which the viewer's emotional involvement is manipulated from the outset as the viewer is prepared for threat to the character. Horror-literate audiences know at once who will be dispatched by the killer and who will manage to defeat him[18] and survive. This is especially true of the 'slasher' genre. When a busty, promiscuous teenager, alone in a dark house, goes to investigate a suspicious noise upstairs, the audience is fairly sure of the outcome and have even been known to become actively involved, shouting warnings at the screen such as, "Don't go upstairs!" Audiences are familiar with this convention and the only surprise will lie in which novel, usually gory, way the girl will be dispatched by the killer. It is precisely this sense of anticipation, this pre-knowledge of the genre that gives rise to pleasure, a pleasure that, for an audience member attuned to the genre, lies in the anticipation of seeing how a particular film manipulates the conventions of the genre, or 'plays the game'.

I would argue that *The Blair Witch Project* does not just 'play the game', but instead re-invents it, taking viewers 'off the map'. Just as the characters are lost in territory that should be well-documented, as Heather says, "this is America. Its impossible to get lost, and just as impossible to stay lost", so the audience is disoriented in the well-worn territory of horror.

The Ending

As discussed previously, one of the motivating forces in narrative is the quest for knowledge; to be able to "ascribe meaning through stories" (Fischer & Landy, 1987:64). Roland Barthes describes this as, "the thrill of triumph over disorder" (as cited in Sandro, 1987:21). Part of this thrill comes through the resolution of the story itself, giving the narrative a satisfactory unity. Paul Sandro cites this pleasure as "the satisfaction of an enigma solved, a destiny reached, a lost object retrieved, or a lesson learned" (1987:21), whilst Linda Williams identifies it as the "science of the 'true' ending as we know it, that 'rounding off' which produces for us the impression of natural completion rather than brutal, arbitrary interruption" (1989:67). This conception of the ending enables the spectator to withdraw satisfied and gives a sense of meaning to their open-ended life. Other theorists have also recognized this pleasure in a 'satisfactory' ending. John and Anna Atkins note that one of the reasons we will push through an 'unpleasurable' experience is to find pleasure in the knowledge we will ultimately gain.

> The pain of suspense, and the irresistible desire to satisfy our curiosity, when once raised, will account for our eagerness to go quite through an adventure, though we suffer actual pain during the course of it. (as cited in Carroll, 1990:181)

Bill Nichols also takes note of this pleasure: "Desire – the desire to recognize a return, a closure, to enjoy pleasure as the subject-who-knows when we recognize the repetition/transformation of the beginning in the ending" (1981:71).

Thanks to convention, often the ending of a horror film will be 'known' in advance, a knowledge many spectators will suppress in order to gain pleasure. How is it possible to find pleasure in an ending we already know? Tania Modleski looks at Roland Barthes who condemns mass culture precisely *because* of the audience's pre-knowledge of the ending. Barthes writes: "I take pleasure in hearing myself tell a story *whose end I know*: I know and I don't know, I act toward myself as though I did not know […] Compared to a dramatic story whose outcome is unknown, there is

effacement of pleasure" (as cited in Modleski, 1986:157). Barthes calls this knowing and unknowing a perverse split or cleavage, whilst Modleski argues that, with genre and formula stories, the pleasure "depends precisely upon suspending our certain knowledge of their outcome" (1986:157), and in seeing one's expectations gratified. Similarly, Leffler argues that a large portion of the audience's enjoyment in horror consists in seeing how revelations with in the framework of a well-established plot structure may be attained: "Although the basic structure of the action is known, its individual formulation is sufficiently unknown for the viewer to become engrossed in a horrific mystery" (Leffler, 2000:268).

A satisfactory ending is especially important in horror where, having encountered the monstrous and the abject, the spectator should be able to leave, having re-drawn the boundaries between him/herself and the abject afresh, re-affirming the status quo. Yvonne Leffler suggests that a 'happy' ending, in which good triumphs, gives moral and psychological safety to the spectator. The viewer "expects a meaningful and satisfactory moral conclusion to the narrative" (Leffler, 2000:266), a conclusion where "the frightening element of the monster is destroyed or rendered harmless for us […] this is our confirmation that good will triumph, resulting in restoration of order, harmony, normality" (Leffler, 2000:266).

However, another convention that has arisen in horror is that of the open-ended narrative, films that, "delight in thwarting the audience's expectations of closure" (Modleski, 1986:160). Increasingly, once the monster is defeated and order restored, there will be a last signal that the threat has not disappeared completely. Modleski suggests that these open-ended films may be seen to be progressive as delight in having expectations of closure frustrated comes close to the 'other film' that, Thierry Kuntzel says, the classic narrative film must work to conceal. This 'other film' would be one in which,

> the configuration of events contained in the female matrix would not form a progressive order, in which the spectator/subject would never be reassured… within the dominant system of production and consumption, this would be a film of sustained terror.
> (Modleski,1986:162)

I would argue that this progressive aspect of the open-ended horror, whilst still effective in some instances, has been lost as this lack of closure has become conventional and, thus, expected. Increasingly, the lack of closure does not mean the frustration of expectation but its confirmation,

and all the survival of the threat indicates is further money-making sequels. This is especially true, I would suggest, because the heart of the audience's desire has been attained; they 'know' the monster. As Noël Carroll proposes, horror itself is primarily driven by curiosity, the desire to "render the unknown known" (1990:185). He writes; "Horror stories, in a significant number of cases, are dramas of proving the existence of monsters and disclosing […] the origin, identity, purposes and powers of the monster" (Carroll, 1990:182). Thus, horror is not just about defeating the monster, but primarily about satisfying our desire to know; it is the pleasure of an enigma solved. Leffler's speculation agrees with this assertion as she suggests that the task of the protagonist is not just to evade or defeat the monster but to "discover and expose its nature" (Leffler, 2000:268). This is part of the pleasurable anticipation of the viewer; the knowledge that the question of who and what the monster is will be answered satisfactorily. I would posit that the open-end now largely carries not only the pleasure of generic expectations satisfied, but also the pleasure of knowledge, and thus control, of the monster. Knowledge that will enable the characters to be more equipped to deal with it in the next instalment. Thus, this is not a masochistic ending but one that, for the most part, has come to reassert control and reassurance on the part of the spectator.

The Blair Witch Project, on the other hand, takes this convention and re-conceives it, which, I propose, makes the film's ending so effective. At the end of *Blair Witch* the viewer does not see what has been tormenting the students, the Witch herself is never shown or explained, nor is the final fate of the students. In a conventional horror the monster and its nature would be exposed, its mysteries revealed. Thus in *Blair Witch*, one would expect to find out what has happened to Josh, and what happens to Mike and Heather, as well as catching a glimpse of the Witch. Instead, the film is built up to a frenzied climax as the remaining students rush to where they hear Josh's voice calling, desperately searching around the house. Then the audience is left in confusion as, after Mike's call, Heather, with the only remaining camera, rushes down to him and all the viewer sees is Mike standing in the corner of the room and Heather's camera is knocked to the ground, accompanied by silence. Then the film ends. Pleasure in both having expectations satisfied and knowledge gained is completely denied. *Blair Witch* ending is so open-ended to be inexplicable and frightening, re-deploying a tired convention to come closer, once again, to a masochistic film of "sustained terror" (Thierry Kuntzels as cited in Modleski, 1986:162).

The 'Final Girl'

One of the strongest conventions to arise in 'slasher' films in the last few decades is that of the "Final Girl" (1992:35), as Carol Clover terms her. Through a series of films in the 1970s and 1980s, such as *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Halloween* (1978), *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) and *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980), strong female lead characters appeared in horror. These heroines would emerge as the sole survivor, able to 'see' the threat in time, in order to either confront it and eradicate the threat, or be rescued in time. This has become a well-recognized convention of the genre: "The Final Girl of the slasher film is presented from the outset as the main character. The practiced viewer distinguishes her from her friends minutes into the film" (Clover, 1992:39). Barbara Creed is another theorist who identifies this convention, where the heroine, who ends the killer's bloodbath, is "Intelligent, resourceful and usually not sexually active, she tends to stand apart from the others" (1993:124).

One of the most important aspects which makes her so easy to identify, is the way in which the 'Final Girl's gender is inscribed in the film. Clover points out, that just as the monster is not fully masculine, but feminized, so the 'Final Girl' is not fully feminine (1992:40). She usually dressed in a more 'boyish' way, unlike the other more overtly sexual female members of the group, and she is also more sexually conservative, often a virgin.[19] More importantly she is given the power to see, which is significant in light of the centrality of vision in horror, as has been discussed in the chapter surrounding vision. Clover says of the 'Final Girl':

> At the level of cinematic apparatus, her unfemininity is signalled clearly by her exercise of the 'active investigating gaze' normally reserved for males and punished in females when they assume it themselves. (Clover, 1992:48)

As MacDonald suggests, "Seeing, learning and knowledge are a masculine prerogative […] women who violate this rule are dangerous and threatening" (2003:3). The other characters in horror, particularly the female ones, who try to 'see', are punished. A standard moment in the 'slasher' is when a girl hears a noise in the attic and goes to investigate and is brutally slaughtered. The 'Final Girl', on the other hand is not only allowed to see by the narrative, but her survival depends on it. She is granted the masculine prerogative of seeing and instead of being punished, survives.

The question then becomes, why is the 'Final Girl' convention so satisfying to audiences that it is endlessly repeated? Yvonne Leffler posits that the heroine is central to our enjoyment to heighten pleasure in anticipation and suspense. She has gone so far as to suggest that the other victims in the 'slasher' are themselves only present in the film in order to intensify our emotional involvement through deepening anticipatory fear for the heroine (Leffler, 2000:250). The other victims are present to demonstrate what the monster is capable of and what the protagonist needs to do in order to defeat it. Leffler suggests that due to the anticipatory nature of horror the other victims are there to build suspense, reaching a climax in the final confrontation between the 'Final Girl' and the monster. As each victim dies a gruesome death by the monster's hands and he comes ever closer to our heroine, our simultaneous fear and excitation builds to a fever-pitch, finding pleasure in the accumulation of fear.

If suspense is central to the pleasure of horror, then this argument would seem to underline the assertion that this genre itself is centrally invested in masochism. Kaja Silverman notes that suspense, "would seem to be at the centre of all forms of masochism […] uncertainty, dilatoriness, pleasurable and unpleasurable anticipation, apparent, interminability, and – above all – excitation" (1992:199). The masochist's ultimate fantasy is that of the symbolic reunion with the mother, as discussed in the first chapter, a reunion which would ultimately lead to the loss of the ego and the death of the subject. Therefore, the attainment of the fantasy is threatening, so pleasure is also attached to anticipation and prolonged excitation. For example, sexually, it is not orgasm that masochists crave, but the excitement of its postponement. As Gaylyn Studlar writes; "In the masochist's suspension of the final 'gratification' of death, the return to the moment of separation from the oral mother must be re-enacted continuously as the masochistic fort/da game of desire that is the meeting point between fantasy and action" (1985:609). She goes on to say that masochism, unlike sadism, which depends on action and immediate gratification, savours suspense and distance (1985:612).

This suspension of gratification and build-up of anticipation can be said to be symbolically enacted by the victims in a way similar to the masochist fantasies of Theodor Reik that both Silverman (1992:206) and Clover (1992:218) examine. This fantasy is characterized by this 'suspense factor', "whereby the masochist imagines himself facing a pain-pleasurable fate that is

inevitable by also, up to a point, delayable" (Clover, 1992: 218). In it, young men wait to be sacrificed to a barbaric idol, as each in turn are castrated and put to death. The masochist shares the terror and anxiety, as well as the physical sensations of the victim as he imagines himself experiencing the same fate shortly. Clover writes: "I would suggest that the correspondence [between screen victim's situation and the viewer] is a function of masochistic fantasy: that people who make movies sense the iterative 'my-turn-is-coming-soon' quality of victimization fantasies" (Clover, 1992:221). Therefore, it is suggested, that our ultimate identification is with the 'Final Girl' herself, and the suspense builds as we imagine that she, and thus possibly the viewer, will be subjected to the same torture and death, "and as the threat draws nearer, the tension achieves explosive proportions" (Clover, 1992:219). However, the 'Final Girl', and thus the viewer, is (usually) victorious, returning viewers from a masochistic fantasy to the status quo, retrieving them from the threat of the loss of ego.[20]

If, as has been suggested, the pleasure in the 'Final Girl' convention lies in the viewer's identification with her and the anticipatory, masochistic build to her confrontation with the monster, the question still remains, why is this figure most often female? This is of special interest in a genre like horror which, as Clover argues, has a large number of male viewers, particularly the 'slasher' which she says "speaks deeply and obsessively to male anxieties" (1992:61). Vera Dika suggests that female victims may be satisfying to male audiences, particularly adolescent ones, because they parallel their own psychosexual growth as "symbolic re-enactments of fantasized acts of castration, making the victim the bearer of the bleeding wound" (1987:97). However, even Dika herself acknowledges that this theory is flawed as it does not account for female audiences or the cycles of popularity of 'slasher' films in the face of human psychology. This also does not account for the satisfaction audiences ostensibly feel in the ultimate victory of the 'Final Girl'. Instead, Carol Clover proposes that it is precisely because the 'Final Girl' is female that pleasure is possible; "the sensation of bodily fright derives not exclusively from repressed content, as Freud insisted, but also from their bodily manifestation of their content" (Clover, 1992:47). Because of her apparent gender, the 'Final Girl' is an ideal screen surrogate, especially for male viewers, because this acts as an identificatory buffer. The male viewer is able to explore taboo subjects, such as abjection, but from a vicarious distance.[21] Clover proposes that, in horror viewing, "there lies a perverse

pleasure, for the sight of pain inflicted on others is 'enjoyed masochistically by the subject through his identification of himself with the suffering object" (1992:175), and it is important that the suffering object is female. This bears a similarity to Freud's 'Theory of Dreams', as explained by Tania Modleski;

> The dreamer, though perhaps absent 'in propria persona' from the dream, may be represented by a variety of people, onto whom the dreamer displaces his/her own fears and desires. In films where the female character occupies a passive position, she enacts on behalf of the male viewer 'the compulsory narrative of loss and recovery'. (Modleski, 1990:69)

This masochism is made easier when the visible player is female, as she is feminine enough so that she is sufficiently removed and can vicariously enact the suffering for the male viewer. "Cinefantastic horror, in short, succeeds in incorporating its spectators as 'feminine' and then violating that body […] in ways imaginable, for males, only in nightmare" (Clover, 1992:53). However, this surrogate cannot be so feminine as to, "disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality" (Clover, 1992:51) and is, therefore, masculinized. It thus becomes clear why the 'Final Girl' is allowed to 'see' and 'know' the killer, something that would usually be punished in women. As a surrogate male she is given this 'power'; a power she usually relinquishes at the end of the narrative when the male viewer gives up identification when the heroine is once again 'femininized'. This feminization is, for the most part, symbolically re-enacted by the 'Final Girl' being 'rescued' by representatives of masculine authority and returned to feminine passivity; for example, in *Halloween* (1978) the last scene of the film has the heroine being comforted and protected by a barrage of male policemen and a psychologist. Clover suggests that this is in place to allow the male spectator to disengage from this cross-gender identification and to keep his masculinity intact (1992:57).

The Blair Witch Project would, at first, appear to replicate the 'Final Girl' convention, thus providing its audiences, particularly the male segment, with the masochistic experience of passive, victim-identification and the build up of suspense. Heather would seem to be the unequivocal heroine of the film. She is portrayed as a single-minded, determined young woman, far stronger than her male team members. She is extremely organized and takes charge of the trip almost entirely. There is also no evidence of romantic interest in her life, no boyfriend is alluded to, although both male team members were involved in relationships (Stern, 1999: 85 & 93). Heather is also dressed very similarly to the men (jeans, shirt) and wears little or no make-up.

There is nothing coquettish or stereotypically feminine about her. I would hesitate to say this masculinizes her, as Creed argues in response to Clover's discussion: "because the heroine is represented as resourceful, intelligent and dangerous it does not follow that she should be seen as a pseudo man" (1993:127). However, I would argue that what makes Heather masculine is her assumption of the investigating gaze.

It is Heather's idea to study the Blair Witch and make a documentary, a genre intimately connected to observing and gaining knowledge, as we have discussed. She is passionate about the concept and her 'diary' later reveals her desire to see the Witch:

> Elly out there. Maybe. Well…? If anything will/can find out it will be me. I can't explain the kinship I feel to her. She will get through. I cannot see how she could avoid perceiving the energy I am sending her way, and have been for 2 years now. (Stern, 1999:151)

As instigator and director of the film crew, Heather is an active, driving force. She also assumes the investigative gaze through her constant use of the camera. She insists on taking her camera along and towards the end of the film uses it as a buffer, refusing to put it down, even when challenged by her team members or when their lives are in danger. Heather may be in front of the camera in the initial stages of the film, acting as narrator, but it us as an active subject who possesses knowledge, not passive object. Therefore, all the conventions of the 'Final Girl' seem to be in place, where horror-literate audiences would immediately designate Heather as the heroine who would defeat the monster.[22]

The Directors and Producers of *The Blair Witch Project* acknowledge this convention and the importance of gender dynamics in the film;

> Gender dynamics between Heather and her two male crew members make *The Blair Witch Project* an outstanding horror project. Whereas teen-slasher films often rely on gender clichés, the *Blair Witch* filmmakers instead develop contextual relationships between characters and document co-dependencies. Not the typical heroine-led-to-the-slaughter, Heather Donahue retains control of her character as a tough-minded director in charge of the film project. Throughout the film's treacherous journey, she guides her crew responsibly. (DVD Production Notes)

I would agree with the Production Notes so far as the strength of Heather's character in the beginning of the film, although she would stand as a the gender cliché in horror: that of the 'Final Girl'. However, this convention is completely undercut as the film progresses. Instead of remaining dynamic and 'guiding her crew responsibly', Heather disintegrates emotionally, becoming completely passive, cowering and whimpering whilst clutching the camera like a

security blanket. I would also agree that the film plays with gender dynamics, but only to further pull Heather down. The DVD Production Notes read: “While the young men acknowledge Heather as the boss, she still must deal with ‘constant mistrust at every turn’. Says Donahue: ‘People often second-guess a woman who’s in a position of authority’”. Whilst the Production Notes, and thus publicity, of the film would have us believe that the gender politics of the film are progressive, I would argue that it is instead completely conservative and falls to punishing woman.

Heather is punished threefold in the film. Firstly, Heather’s male team members blame her for their predicament, despite the fact that it was Josh who threw the map away.[23] Heather never defends herself from these assertions and seems to accept them as deserved. Heather is also punished by the Witch; hunted, terrified and murdered. Lastly, Heather punishes herself. Throughout the film Heather is the active investigator, wielding the camera. However, towards the end of the film, Heather turns the camera on to herself, surrendering herself as a passive object in a scene MacDonald characterizes as, “bordering on sadism” (2002:5). This particular scene, which has been much parodied in popular culture, has Heather delivering a tearful, hysterical monologue to the camera as she accepts the entire blame for their situation, begging for forgiveness, confirming the stereotype of the helpless female. The camera is unflatteringly close as tears run down her face and mucous drips from her nose. She is almost a grotesque parody of the determined, confident young woman of the beginning.

Deneka MacDonald criticizes *The Blair Witch Project* as reaffirming gendered ideologies through this punishment. MacDonald draws on Laura Mulvey’s essay around the myth of Pandora, where a woman’s probing releases all of the evils into the world, to maintain that modern horror films, and *Blair Witch* in particular, reinforce the perception that the combination of curiosity and femininity is a dangerous one.

> ‘Do not go downstairs’, ‘do not go into the woods’, ‘do not talk to strangers’, and ‘do not open the door when you are alone’ are recurring warnings in horror genre, yet these warnings also bleed into real psychological and sociological lesions: ‘Do not trespass, cross gender boundaries, or stray from social norms’. (MacDonald,2002:2)

MacDonald suggests that one of the reasons Heather is punished so severely is because she oversteps these boundaries. The Witch, as we shall discuss in the next chapter, transgresses the boundaries of gender and nature. Heather, in investigating these transgressions, oversteps these

boundaries too. Whereas the 'Final Girl' is usually allowed to acquire the active gaze, it is particularly this curiosity that Heather is punished for, undercutting these conventions.

At the end of *The Blair Witch Project*, instead of the heroine's victory, Heather is rendered passive, all power or control taken away, and then killed. Thus the film would seem to be redeploying this convention and undermining the audience's expectations. The anticipatory pleasure and build up to suspense is present,[24] but instead of returning the viewer from this masochism the film takes it even further into this perversion, indeed into the ultimate masochistic fantasy of reincorporation and death. Instead of the film allowing the spectator, particularly the male one, to disengage from the 'Final Girl's gaze and reaffirm his masculinity, the film leaves the viewer in a passive, helpless position that is regarded as feminine. The last gaze we see is that of Heather's, through the camera, a gaze that is disempowered and the gazer, presumably, killed. This completely subverts the audience's expectations. As Yvonne Leffler points out, it is because the viewer is able to identify the heroine and is able to project the ending that he/she feels assured of a 'safe' conclusion. "Since the audience is assured of a positive outcome for the good character, there is no risk involved in sympathising with him or her and allowing oneself to be drawn into the plot" (Leffler, 2000:267). It is precisely this 'safety' that is called into question, the 'Final Girl' murdered, threatening our psychological safety and leaving us in a place of utter masochism. What should be a familiar formula of the genre is suddenly rendered unexpected and frightening.

Once again, *The Blair Witch Project* would appear to offer spectators the possibility of a masochistic experience; the experience of pleasure through the perversion of expectation. The film would seem to undercut control and certainty by blurring the distinction between fantasy and reality and by subverting conventions. As Paul Sandro writes;

> Films that play relentlessly with the conventions of narrative cinema, they are contentious, difficult films. The pleasure in these films is none other than perverse […] in watching these films our desires, baited and betrayed, are in a sense turned against us; any notion of innocent pleasure in the enjoyment of narrative that we may have had is qualitatively soured like a wine that has turned. (1987:1)

However, it would appear that this perverse pleasure is not un-gendered, with female stereotypes and patriarchal conceptions of women being reinforced. It is particularly the question of pleasure and gender representation in the film that will now be addressed.

Chapter 4:
The Witch, the Woods and the Woman - Femininity and Monstrousness

Thus far in this discussion, *The Blair Witch Project* would seem to subvert 'typical' mainstream cinematic pleasure whose foundation may be said to be based on control, distance, mastery and closure. Instead, *Blair Witch* opens up the possibility for masochistic positioning and perverse pleasure. The film may, thus, be seen to be challenging, opposing the 'false pleasure' that popular texts are usually criticized as offering. Tania Modleski however argues that horror films, whilst they may be "apocalyptic and nihilistic, as hostile to meaning, form, pleasure, and the specious good as many types of high art" (1986:162), they may also signal the limits of this adversarial position, particularly in gender politics. Modleski writes:

> the mastery these popular texts no longer permit through effecting closure or eliciting narcissistic identification is often reasserted through projecting the experience of submission and defencelessness onto the female body. In this way the texts enable the male spectator to distance himself somewhat from the terror. And, as usual, it is the female spectator who is truly deprived of 'solace and pleasure'. (Modleski, 1986:163)

To what extent does *The Blair Witch Project* confirm Modleski's contention, or does it also offer new spaces for gendered subjectivity for the spectator?

As has been previously examined, horror often deals with the repressions and anxieties of childhood, revisiting them. One of the central concerns of childhood is the problem of sexual difference: infantile sexual investigation of the distinction between the two sexes and their relationship to each other. Deneka MacDonald in her analysis of *The Blair Witch Project* argues that the film is rigorously defined by this same gendered imagination and that gender itself is one of the fundamental preoccupations of horror. She draws on Linda Badley who makes the point that "horror has been a gendered issue since the eighteenth century Gothic Revival" (as cited in MacDonald, 2002:2). This is especially important when one looks at the figure of the monster or 'other' in *The Blair Witch Project*. As Rudolf Arnheim declared in 1949, "the monster has become a portrait of ourselves and of the kind of life we have chosen to lead" (as cited in Waller, 1987:9), and Noël Carroll writes, monsters in horror films "do not subvert the culture's conception of personhood, but rather articulates them" (1990: 178). Looking at *The Blair Witch*

Project then, what conception of society does the Blair Witch articulate; what does she tell us about 'otherness' and repression in society? This is especially interesting since she is female, and I will argue that her gender provides an altogether different pleasure than that of her male counterparts.

Monsters, in most horror films, are seldom thought of in terms of pleasure, instead they usually embody visceral revulsion, an emotional feature Noel Carroll identifies as central to horror: "threat compounded with revulsion, nausea, and disgust" (1990:22). Monsters tend to inspire loathing and distaste in the audience: their mindless violence and cruel natures compounded by the repulsive imagery with which they are coupled. However, it is also important to note, as Yvonne Leffler does, that the monster not only has to represent menace and 'otherness', but also must be intriguing; "it is crucial to our enjoyable experience that the personification of menace, the antagonist or the monster, is presented both as fascinating and terrifying" (2000:265). The monster embodies the strange paradox of simultaneous repulsion and attraction inherent in horror. Robin Wood suggests one reason for the apparent attraction of the monster figure is because it points to: "what is repressed (though never destroyed) in the self and projected outward to be hated and disavowed" (Wood, 1987:73), and, if possible, annihilated. These repressed elements are projected onto the figure of the 'other', the monster, often through 'condensation' and 'displacement'.[1] The pleasure may therefore lie in engaging with these repressed feelings, acknowledging and confronting them through confrontation with the monster, but with the revulsion felt for the 'other' camouflaging the viewer's desire for the very revulsion the monster represents.

Another argument is that the monster allows us to deal with deviant desires, by being able to vicariously act out taboo fantasies in a manner that is not 'too close' because the monster has been disavowed. As Hand D. Baumann says, horror is attractive because it deals with violence, which is taboo in society, and it is through "identification with a proxy character in the fictional world, the audience can both live out its anxiety and aggression and direct it at a concrete object" (Baumann as cited in Leffler, 1993:55).[2] This viewpoint is aligned with the idea of horror as fulfilling a sadistic, male pleasure: male monsters hunting down passive female victims,

highlighting the binaries of active/male/ monster and passive/female/victim. However, *The Blair Witch Project* does not have a male monster, but a female one, challenging these binaries.

The Witch

As has been mentioned, the central figure of monstrousness in *Blair Witch* is the witch herself. Creed points out that the character of the witch is one of the most recognizable in horror and fantastic literature and the film draws on this tradition. One need only think of examples in popular culture: the cannibalistic crone in the Hansel and Gretel fairytale, the three hags in William Shakespeare's play Macbeth (1993), the witch in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and the monsters in Roald Dahl's children's book The Witches (1985). The witch is "invariably represented as an old, ugly crone who is capable of monstrous acts" (1993:2) says Creed, and she is usually "depicted as a monstrous figure with supernatural powers and a desire for evil" (1993:76). In *The Blair Witch Project* the witch, presumably the vengeful spirit of Ellie Kedward, is never seen, but her omnipotent presence and disturbing power permeate the entire film, and the film draws on a tradition of representation surrounding monstrousness and femininity, as shall be discussed at length.

In examining horror film scholarship prior to her own, Barbara Creed finds that this work virtually ignores the presence of active female monsters in horror texts, concentrating instead on woman as the victim. She speculates that these theorists write from a Freudian perspective where women are terrifying because they are already castrated and therefore already a victim. "Such a position only serves to reinforce patriarchal definitions of woman which represent and reinforce the essentialist view that woman, by *nature*, is a victim" (Creed, 1993:7). Instead, Creed sets out to examine the figure of the female monster in film which, she posits, exploit notions that women are terrifying. According to Creed, all societies have an idea of the monstrous-feminine, "of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (1993:1), and that the concept of this monstrousness is specifically grounded in sexual difference. Creed claims, using the writings of Steve Neale, that "man's fascination with and fear of female sexuality is endlessly reworked within the signifying processes of the horror film" (1993:5). Robin Wood says that one of the major things repressed in society is female sexuality (1986:71), thus horror becomes a space of

dealing with these repressed issues. One of the central conceptions we will be examining that aligns femininity with monstrousness is abjection.

Julia Kristeva (1982) used the concept of abjection to explore how the human is separated from the non-human, both physically and symbolically; what is excluded in order to differentiate between the human from the other. However, there are some objects and concepts that defy these categories, occupying a border position, making them abject. Abjection is that which confounds categories defining what is human, what is 'natural' and 'unnatural', threatening these borders and taking us to "the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva, 1982;2). Abjection is threatening because it opens up the possibility of a vulnerable, penetrable, changeable body, showing the body is not 'naturally constituted'. The abject is that which crosses the border between human and non-human; that which violates borders and inspires the feelings of disgust and loathing. It is that which is "ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (Kristeva, 1982:1). Abjection, through being the 'negative', serves both to delineate the physical, bodily boundaries of the human, as well as the boundaries surrounding social and cultural beings. "Although the subject must exclude the abject, the abject must, nevertheless, be tolerated for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life" (Creed, 1993:9). Anything that draws attention to the fragility of the boundaries of prohibitions and taboos placed upon those who exist within society, within the symbolic, is abject and it points to the notion that the social self is not 'natural', but constructed. Therefore, among other things, cannibalism, perversion, incest, murder and human sacrifice will be regarded as abject.

Besides abject deeds, those things that cross the border of the body, that were once part of the human subject, but are now excluded and threaten the very body they were ejected out of, are also abject. What once was 'I' is no longer 'I', it is simultaneously 'me' and 'not-me' and thus defies categorization. Besides physically threatening the body, often through the threat of decay and disease, it also points to the vulnerability of the body's boundaries; "what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, point to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection" (Kristeva, 1982:108). As Creed discusses, the abject violates the viewer's sense of their body as impregnable, inviolate, clean and whole by showing bodies that clearly aren't any of the above things, illustrating that the skin is not a guarantee of bodily integrity but only a

fragile container (1993:156). Some examples of the abject are: bodily wastes and excretions, faeces, urine, tears, sweat, mucus, saliva, seminal fluid and pus. Another example is the corpse, which Kristeva says is "the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel. 'I' is expelled" (Creed, 1993:9).

> A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into a dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the organic, […] the corpse represents fundamental pollution. A body without soul, a non-body, disquieting matter. (Kristeva, 1982:109)

The corpse represents the dissolution of the boundary between subject and object; a body that was once human that has now become waste. This touches on one of the ultimate fears: the loss of self. This is also linked to the fear of absorption of the self, the loss of identity and autonomy. This was touched on in the first chapter in the discussion of Gaylyn Studlar's assertion that spectatorship replicates a passive, masochistic relationship with the oral mother in which the child is 'absorbed', an ambiguous positioning that is both pleasurable and threatening. Whenever the borders of the self begin to be blurred and selfhood is threatened, one finds abjection.

Besides threatening selfhood and the symbolic, abjection is also necessary to define the very boundaries it threatens. As Creed writes: "the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject take up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic" (1993:9). Horror and abjection go hand-in-hand, as both are preoccupied with boundaries. As Gregory Waller argues:

> Horror defines and redefines, clarifies and obscures the relationship between the human and the supernatural, the conscious and the unconscious, the daydream and the nightmare, the civilized and the primitive – slippery categories and tenuous oppositions indeed, but the very oppositions and categories that are essential to our sense of life. (1987:12)

Rosemary Jackson, like Gregory Waller, asserts that horror and fantasy serves to expose how culture defines itself and is thus pre-occupied with limits and limiting categories, as well their dissolution (as cited in Carroll, 1990:75). She argues that this enforcement of boundaries is brought about in horror films through a confrontation with the abject, facilitated through the figure of the monster and other images that repulse us. Creed suggests that the modern horror film thus becomes similar to a ritual that attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject in order to acknowledge, eject and then redraw the boundaries between the human and non-human.

> Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. Through ritual, the demarcation lines between the human and non-human are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process. (Creed, 1993:8)

Creed also maintains that the abject in horror films possibly serves to reinforce the viewer's sense of bodily wholeness and selfhood. Through the encounter with abjection, with bodily wastes and disintegration, this might reassure the viewer of that their own body is "clean, whole, impregnable, living, inviolate" (Creed, 1993:156). Thus, whilst abject images may fill the viewing subject with disgust and loathing, they also act to reassure the viewer. One might argue that the pleasure inherent in *Blair Witch* and *Book of Shadows* is the pleasure of enacting repressed desires and fantasies, experiencing the taboo and simultaneously reaffirming cultural prohibitions and the boundaries of self. However, it is important to bear in mind that the abject is not always so neatly 'packed away' again, sometimes prohibitions are left violated and horror audiences are left with a sense of creeping unease.

Besides just serving to re-draw boundaries, abjection may also be pleasurable in itself. Like the visceral revulsion of horror itself, abjection isn't entirely abhorrent, but instead extremely ambiguous, repelling and attracting simultaneously. As Kristeva writes, abjection "beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened it rejects" (1982:1). Barbara Creed maintains that the presence of the abject in horror films points to desire to encounter the unthinkable, the other, the forbidden: "a perverse pleasure" (1993:154). Horror films, Creed posits, are like rituals of purification in which enables the spectator to vicariously wallow in taboo forms of behaviour before restoring order and 'proper' behaviour.

> Viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for a perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images/ being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, once having been filled with perversity, taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator's seat). (1993:10)

Kristeva too equates pleasure in abjection with perversity; she identifies this pleasure as "the pangs and delights of masochism" (Kristeva, 1982:5).

Images of abjection abound in *The Blair Witch Project*, perhaps allowing masochistic pleasure. Much of this abjection centres on The Blair Witch herself; such as her supernatural powers. As Creed points out in her discussion of the history of the witch figure, magical powers have always inspired dread in ancient societies as they breach the delineation between the natural and the supernatural, the known and the unknown. Denka MacDonald, in her reading of the film, says "supernatural power is unknown and arguably knows no boundaries, and, if so, they cannot be firmly determined" (2002:1), thus threatening the boundaries of the 'natural'. The figure of the hag has also been linked, through Christianity, to the devil and evil, to Satanism and evil cults that perform taboo rites of murder and cannibalism, all abject deeds. These connotations are especially played upon by the use of the runic, pagan symbols that appear as twig figure in the forest, drawing on ideas of ancient black magic and popular culture's conception of these elements of the occult.[3] The Blair Witch herself is also linked to the supernatural control of nature, one of *The Curse of the Blair Witch's* 'archival sources' says, "she controlled the animals of the forest, even trees did her bidding". She seems to be able to blur the boundaries of reality destroying the logical nature of causality. The students in *The Blair Witch Project* follow their compass closely, walking in one direction, but continually end up in the same place. Although this is never fully explained in the film, the inference is that the Witch is controlling the forest and throwing off even the magnetism of the compass. The 'dossier' by D. A. Stern (1999) even plays with the idea that the Witch is able to take them to a different dimensional or psychic space. In a transcribed telephone answering machine message to the Buchanan Investigation agency, investigator Steve Whately says:

> I'm talking to Hart about the search party, and he was saying how by Thursday night – that's the 27th – they were on their second go-round through the forest. But Buck, they should have found those kids, because according to that footage Mrs. Donahue's got, they were still out there wandering around lost. (Stern, 1999:52)

The witch is also linked to abjection through images of blood, as Creed points out, "blood taboos are of course central to all cultures" (1993:150). Heather and Michael, after Josh's disappearance, find a bloody bundle of material enclosing a bloody object that might be either fingers or teeth. There are also children's dark brown handprints in the witch's house itself which, through knowledge of the story's history, one might infer as dried blood from the missing children of Blair.

While there may be subversion in this possible articulation of perverse pleasure, pleasure in encountering taboo and abjection, pleasure, as we have seen, is not neutral. What becomes important in this discussion is the way that this abjection is encoded. Abjection is not merely to be found in the monstrous, instead abjection is firmly located in femininity itself, and femininity becomes equated with monstrousness.[4] Woman is allied with that which has been excluded from the borders of the 'human' but threatens to return. As Creed maintains, woman is not by her nature abject, but instead abjection, "is a function of the ideological project of the horror film – a project designed to perpetuate the belief that woman's monstrous nature is inextricably bound up with her difference as man's sexual other" (1993:83).

Women have a special relationship to the abject, especially because of the female connection to the 'animal world' and to the body. Creed, drawing on Kristeva, says that women are linked to nature because her maternal, generative function links her directly to the great cycle of birth, decay and death. This link to nature is abject because, "Awareness of his links to nature reminds man of his mortality and the fragility of the symbolic order" (Creed, 1993:47). It is important to note, says Kristeva, that for a body to represent the symbolic order it must be unmarked, it "must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic" (Kristeva in Creed, 1993:47). The maternal body, on the other hand, swells and stretches, bleeds and discharges, and, most importantly, it questions the boundary of selfhood because two bodies exist within one body. As Creed writes; "The womb represents the utmost in abjection for it contains a new life which will pass from inside to outside bringing with it traces of its contamination – blood, afterbirth, faeces" (Creed, 1993:49). The womb is thus conceived of as abject by masculinity, but also becomes a signifier of not only the connection to nature, but also woman's essential sexual, biological difference.

> The womb, unthought of in its place of the first sojourn in which we become bodies, is fantasized by many men to be a devouring mouth, a cloaca or anal and urethral outfall, a phallic threat, at best reproductive. And in the absence of valid representations of female sexuality, this womb merges with the woman's sex as a whole. (Irigaray, 1991:41)

The womb in no way can be thought of as an adapted male organ, as in the way the vagina is linked to the infantile belief that it is the remaining "bleeding wound" (Mulvey, 1992:747) of the castrated penis, a perception that means woman "can only exist in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (Mulvey, 1992:747). Instead, the womb is the ultimate signifier that women

are essentially different and thus this may ultimately fulfil the masculine fear that women *don't* lack and envy the penis. "The fear, in other words, is that she has desires different from his own" (Williams, 1989:117). Inasmuch as female sexuality as difference is monstrous, as outlined by Creed (1993:2), the womb is the ultimate signifier of this difference, and thus the monstrousness of woman.

Kristeva and Creed also posit that the pregnant body is abject, not only as it is linked to nature, but because it also symbolizes maternal authority. This maternal authority, like the woman's body, is connected intimately to nature. It is this through the mother's role in sphincter training, that the child learns about the shape of the body, the clean and unclean, the proper and improper: "Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self's clean and proper body" (Kristeva in Creed, 1993:14). Kristeva writes:

> this authority shapes the body into *territory* having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted. (1982:72)

This maternal authority is countered by, what Creed terms, the law of the father. This law represents patriarchy and the symbolic and is the period "within which, with the phallic phase and the acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape" (Kristeva, 1982:72). For it is through excluding and denying the abject, repressing behaviour and speech that is regarded as unacceptable and unclean, that the subject enters the symbolic (Creed, 1993:37).

> A split seems to have set in between, on the one hand, the body's territory where an authority without guilt prevails, a kind of fusion between mother and nature, and on the other hand, a totally different universe of socially signifying performances where embarrassment, shame, guilt, desire, etc. come into play – the order of the phallus. (Kristeva, 1982:74)

It is this paternal law that has to reinforce proper codes of civilized behaviour and of the clean and proper body, says Creed. Luce Irigaray (1991) posits that it is through the paternal law that the child gains access to the symbolic, imposing language and symbols on the archaic, bodily world of the mother. It is the paternal that ensures that the link between the mother and the child is severed, that the maternal authority and all she signifies, the body and its connection to nature, is repressed. Creed posits that this encounter with abjection can be pleasurable, a retreat from the symbolic, the domain of the father and a return to the world of the mother:

> Their [images of abjection] presence in the horror film may invoke a response of disgust from the audience situated as it is within the social symbolic but at a more archaic level the representation of bodily wastes may invoke a pleasure in breaking the taboo on filth – sometimes described as pleasure in perversity – and a pleasure in returning to that time when the mother-child relationship was marked by an untrammelled pleasure in 'playing' with the body and its wastes. (Creed, 1990:13)

As has been discussed, horror films speak obsessively to sexual difference, and abjection is used as a tool to substantiate male fears surrounding reproduction and sexual difference, equating femininity with monstrousness. Creed specifically uses the term monstrous feminine to emphasize the importance of gender in the construction of monstrosity (1993:3). The Blair Witch is not just monstrous because of her power, but specifically because she is a woman and her monstrousness is located in her femininity, and is played out in female terms, after all, there are no male witches. The male equivalent of the witch is the warlock, but these figures are shaped in completely different terms, with their power unrelated to sexual difference or abjection. As Creed writes in her analysis of *Carrie*: "There is one incontestably monstrous role in the horror film that belongs to woman – that of the witch" (1993:73). The conventional physical description of the witch also links her to abjection as she is described as an old hag, her ageing body pointing to the limitations and disintegration of the body through the aging process, relating her to the boundary between life and death.

The Blair Witch is also abject because she is an implacable enemy of the symbolic order, especially because she is a woman who possesses power; power that cannot be controlled by patriarchy. This is evidenced by the failure of science, the realm of patriarchy, to explain or contain her. MacDonald writes, "the apparent lack of control over the witch and her wealth of 'possible' supernatural power is perhaps one of the most fearsome notions we face in fantastic literature" (2002:2). Besides her supernatural power, she is also a threat to the notion of family, maternity and society. As Creed suggests; the witch in popular mythology, "is thought to be dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her evil powers to wreak destruction on the community" (1993:76). The Blair Witch doesn't take up her 'proper' place, as determined by patriarchy, as wife and mother. In life Ellie Kedward was a spinster, a woman uncontrolled by the boundaries of matrimony. After she is executed she become threatening to society because she kills its children, not only is this a horrifying, abject deed, but she also brings the continuity

of the town in question, as children are supposed to be able to carry on their line and take up their place as adults in society, entering the symbolic.

There is another way the Blair Witch may also be regarded as an enemy of patriarchy – she threatens castration. Although a great deal of psychoanalytic writing about women centres on Freud's conception that link's man's fear of woman to the infantile belief that she is castrated, Creed contends that it is perhaps not the fear that she is castrated, but that *she castrates*, that is prevalent. Instead, she says, "notion of the castrated woman is a phantasy intended to ameliorate man's fear of what woman might do to him" (1993:6). The fear that woman possesses vagina dentata, teeth in her vagina, which will bite off the man's genitals.[5] There are two specific images that I suggest refer to the Witch as a castratice in the films. Heather and Michael find a bloody bundle near their tent and it is unclear what is exactly inside it. It looks vaguely like either bloody, amputated fingers, or pulled teeth. Both are significant in psychoanalytic terms, as they are both associated with castration, as symbolic substitutes for the penis. In Freud's analysis of dreams, teeth either represent masturbation, or "a tooth being pulled out by someone else in a dream is as a rule to be interpreted as castration" (Freud in Creed, 1993:117). Thus the image of the bundle specifically attempts to arouse castration anxiety in the (male) viewer. The second image, although from *Blair Witch's* sequel, further explicates the first film's preoccupations. In it a female character miscarries, her blood staining her genital area, starkly red against her white jeans. This links to Creed who draws on C. D. Daly's discussion of the taboo surrounding menstrual blood: this taboo is not because the woman is castrated, but because the blood represents that of the castrated male genitals; "the sight of woman's blood confirmed men's fear of being eaten and castrated by the female genitals" (1993:112). Thus the films both draw on the imagery of castration to construct the Witch not as castrated, not as the passive victim, but as the active, threatening castrator.[6]

The Blair Witch also represents abjection through her connection to nature. Although she is never seen in the film, she is described as a woman with extremely furry arms whose feet never touch the ground. This specifically marks her as 'other', calling into question the boundaries between human and animal, giving her animalistic qualities. She is composite and ambiguous, she "disturbs identity, system order" (Kristeva, 1982:4). Her link to nature is also seen through

her supernatural powers, which Creed specifically links to her gender: "Her evil powers are seen as part of her 'feminine' nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature" (Creed, 1993:76). More importantly, the Blair Witch is completely bound up with the forest, over which she seems to have control and from which she seems to gain her power.

The Woods: The Archaic Mother

The Blair Witch Project clearly delineates the forest and the house as the witch's domain, not to be invaded. The Blair Witch seems to use materials found in her domain: rock cairns and stick figurines, and she blocks up the stream with oily bundles of rags in her 1825 manifestation when she snatches Eileen Treacle. She seemingly has power over the woods, ostensibly transporting the students through space and time. For example, the house that the students find at the end is the same of that of Rustin Parr, a house that supposedly burned down in 1941.[7] In a note from one of the investigators in the Dossier, he writes" "The last scene in the kids' footage is in Rustin Parr's house. Which is impossible, because that house burned down in 1941" (Stern, 1999:128). One theorist goes so far as to say that the central protagonist in the film is ultimately the woods itself: "This emphasis on landscape is reminiscent of the classical Hollywood western where the background becomes not merely a context for the unfolding narrative, but contains specific ideological significance", becoming the 1990s equivalent of the 'Frontier' (Cowan,1999).

Deneka MacDonald draws on the study of the politics of location by Adrienne Rich to posit that the space of the forest is delineated according to gender. "There is something fundamentally fearsome about the deep vast forest – perhaps it is the uncharted territory or wilderness itself that frightens us, or the forest's deep connection with nature as a volatile and uncontrollable space" (MacDonald, 2002:2). Just as woman has been aligned with nature, so these uncontrollable spaces are allied with the Witch and with femininity itself.

> In such a way, the horror film confronts issues of human geography at a visual level which is compelling: forests are 'inside' or 'private' spaces associated with nature and the feminine, whilst cities and towns are 'outside' or 'public' spaces associated with culture and the masculine. (MacDonald, 2002:2)

It is when outsiders invade this private, 'feminine' territory, that they are punished. MacDonald points out that when the students are on outskirts of the forest, which could be seen as the

boundary between public and private, still safe, that are able to find their way easily and there no strange noises at night. However, it is the next day when they go deeper into forest and find the strange area with piles of rock, which are reminiscent of gravesites, which they begin to get lost and strange noises disturb their sleep. MacDonald suggests that this is because they have transgressed into a forbidden area, a transgression they are punished for. Further, she says, it is Joshua Leonard who is first killed, because he was the first to stumble into this place, this "secret place of worship" (MacDonald, 2002:3). It is thus very significant that the remaining characters are in the witch's house when they are, presumably, killed: "another forbidden place – one that is wholly private in which they dare to trespass" (MacDonald, 2002:3). This environment ties the Blair Witch to abjection as the forest itself is seen a 'feminine space', further entrenching the binaries of masculine/culture and feminine/outside culture. The forest has a long history as a trope in cautionary tales that reinforce the perception that femininity combined with curiosity is dangerous. For example, Little Red Riding Hood is punished and has to be rescued from the Big Bad Wolf by the Woodcutter, the representative of patriarchy, because she wandered off the path, into 'not-culture', and spoke to a stranger. This conception of the forest further emphasizes the Witch placement outside of culture. Most importantly, the forest, the Witch's setting, aligns her to the abject through the presence of the archaic mother.

The archaic mother is another figure of the monstrous-feminine that can be said to perpetuate ideological beliefs that link femininity and monstrousness. The archaic mother, according to Creed, is the "parthenogenetic mother, the mother as primordial abyss, the point of origin and of end" (1993:17). She is the ultimate, "gestating, all-devouring womb" (Creed, 1993:27) that, whilst giving birth to all living things, also threatens to re-incorporate everything in her path. She is "present in all horror films as the blackness of extinction – death" (1993:28). The archaic mother is abject because she threatens the dissolution and loss of the self, evoking anxieties of ultimate fusion with this mother. Both the archaic mother and the phallic, pre-oedipal mother, that were discussed earlier in relation to Gaylyn's Studlar's theories of masochistic spectatorship, threaten to dissolve the boundaries of the self. This unity with the pre-oedipal mother, which threatens the loss of selfhood and complete absorption by the mother, is pleasurable as well. This mother is comforting because she neutralizes the fear of abandonment, restoring the "sense of wholeness of the first symbiotic relationship" (Studlar, 1985:614) and embodies the primal

desire for unity and symbiosis between child and mother. On the other hand, whilst the archaic mother promises non-differentiation and wholeness, this wholeness is altogether negative and threatening: a psychic death that denies the subject an autonomous, separate self. The archaic mother is not like the phallic mother, but neither is she the "protective/suffocating mother of the pre-Oedipal, or the mother as object of sexual jealousy and desire as she is represented in the Oedipal configuration" (Creed, 1993:25). Instead, says Creed, she is outside this patriarchal constellation. She lacks nothing and does not depend on the phallus for her definition. She is the omnipotent archaic force linked to death and ultimate incorporation.

> The archaic mother is present in the horror film in order to bring about a confrontation with this abjection, a confrontation with death that "gives rise to a terror of self-disintegration, of losing one's self or ego". (Creed, 1993:28)

She threatens the integrity of the self, playing on the spectator's fears of bodily and psychic incorporation. "The desires and fears invoked by the image of the archaic mother […] are always there in the horror text – all pervasive, all encompassing – because of the constant presence of death" (Creed, 1993:28). While distinctly unpleasant, this also serves to fulfil the abject desire of the spectator to encounter this dissolution of the self, the desire "to return to the original oneness with the mother" (Creed, 1993:28). This is a desire to confront the masochistic fantasy of re-incorporation and overcome it, re-establishing the border between life and death, the human and the non-human. Although it is important to bear in mind that not all horror films are this conservative as some may not re-establish this border fully. The archaic mother is present in the blackness of the woods that threatens to engulf the students, and at the end of *Blair Witch Project* when Heather's camera, through which we view the diegetic world, is dropped on the floor and the screen goes blank. As Creed writes,

> the confrontation with death as represented in the horror film gives rise to a terror of self-disintegration, of losing one's self or ego – often represented cinematically by a screen which becomes black, signifying obliteration of the self, the self of the protagonist in the film, and the spectator in the film. (1993:28)

The archaic mother is important to our discussion because once again we see these fears of and desire for abjection played out in feminine terms; these fears projected onto the female body. Whilst the archaic mother is represented as "an omnipresent and all-powerful totality, an absolute being" (Dadoun, 1989:53), her presence is distinctly feminine, indicated by womb-like, intra-uterine settings. The archaic mother is often linked to the womb through the idea of her "voracious maw" (Creed, 1993:27), Some of the signs of the archaic mother are damp cellars,

steep stairs, dried blood and dark empty tunnels and chambers, any dim lit, enclosed, threatening spaces: “Everything associated with the archaic mother belongs to (a) the idea of an empty forgotten house, the first mansion or dwelling place, and (b) the image of the last resting place, the grave, Mother Earth” (Creed, 1993:48). Imagery of the archaic mother can be seen in the ‘graveyard’ the three students stumble into in the forest which has piles of stones, and a later one with twig figures. Creed goes on to say that the archaic mother is a totalizing presence apprehended only through the sense and specific signs like those listed above; “Her presence constitutes the background of the horror film” (1993:148). The fear of the archaic mother, as connected to the womb, is linked to masculinity’s ultimate fear; the fear of woman’s generative powers.

As has previously been discussed, the womb is threatening because it is the ultimate signifier of sexual difference and of maternal authority. However, it may also be seen as threatening because it arouses the desire for union with the mother, for non-differentiation and the prohibitions that surround this desire. The mother-child bond, says Irigaray, remains in the shadows of our culture because it is a mad desire, the “dark continent” (Irigaray, 1991:35). “The taboo is in the air. If the father did not sever this over-intimate bond with the primal womb, there might be the danger of fusion, of death” (Irigaray, 1991:39). Kristeva too argues that this early mother-child relationship is marked by abjection, the child trying to break away from the mother, but simultaneously desiring her. Therefore, a prohibition is placed onto the maternal body, one that counteracts incestuous desire for the mother, against the danger of absorption, reinforcing the boundary between mother and child. The presence of the maternal authority, Kristeva says, “challenges the rational discourse of the symbolic order and the seeming stability of the rational subject” (1993:38), pointing to the boundary between these two ‘laws’.

The image of the womb can be seen not only as threatening because it is linked to abjection, to the body and the loss of the self, but also because it is linked to the uncanny. The uncanny, according to Freud, is that which is familiar, but has become alienated or repressed in the mind and returns as the unfamiliar which is simultaneously familiar/unfamiliar, or unheimlich.[8] It is a feeling of anxiety that is manifested in the presence of certain persons, things, sensations, experiences and situations and it arises whenever infantile fears, beliefs and desires that have

been exiled to the unconscious return, "but in a form so distorted and disguised by repression that we fail to recognize its psychological source" (Castle, 1995:7). Whereas abjection tends to give rise to revulsion, the uncanny arouses dread, horror and uneasiness, although both may be linked.

> A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. (Kristeva, 1982:2)

The womb itself, the former home of the subject, has become alienated and returns through, "A feeling associated with a familiar/unfamiliar place, losing one's way, womb fantasies, a haunted house" (Freud in Creed, 1993:54). It is specifically through the use of the haunted house, the witch's house and it's the intra-uterine setting, that the uncanny is evoked in *The Blair Witch Project*. The house, so intimately connected with the Witch herself, arouses fear and unease, I would propose, because it links to the infantile desire for and fear of incorporation with the mother. The house becomes a representation of the womb, which becomes a metonymic sign of the mother. Freud suggests that the uncanny unsettles so profoundly "precisely because it brings to light – by way of a host of strange yet refulgent inventions – one of the darkest secrets of the psyche" (Castle, 1995:7), that which should have remained hidden. Thus the haunted house and womb imagery we have discussed unsettles because it touches on this perverse desire for the womb, for the mother, a desire which is repressed as taboo. The film itself plays out this uncanniness, disturbing order and rationality, especially since the Witch's house, in which Heather and Michael are presumably killed, was destroyed.

The Woman: Pleasure and Spectatorship

The Blair Witch might, therefore, be seen to further open up the possibilities for masochistic pleasure. Her presence may be said to bring about the confrontation with repression, abjection and the uncanny, arousing feelings of unease and disgust, but also feelings of perverse pleasure. What is important in this discussion is what the Witch and this pleasure articulates about culture and subjectivity, particularly about gendered subjectivity. The film brings about a confrontation with these spaces that are regarded as 'feminine', forbidden, uncanny and representative of the

womb of the archaic mother. These spaces are not only equated with the feminine, but also with the monstrous and the confrontation is ultimately punished as the characters with which we identify and experience this abjection are killed. The film could thus be said to re-build the prohibitions around the female reproductive body, letting the audience encounter it in all its condensed and displaced forms, but sending the message that if you attempt to encounter this you will be punished. If horror films bring about an encounter with the taboo and are wish-fulfilment phantasies that address deep-set anxieties and repressions, *The Blair Witch Project* definitely emphasizes the fear and anxieties surrounding femininity and the maternal. It seems to be a ritual of purification in which femininity, specifically the maternal, is seen as needing to be purified.

The horror and revulsion in *The Blair Witch Project* would seem, as Creed notes of horror in general, to speak mostly to male fears and anxieties. To be arousing visceral revulsion through a confrontation with femininity; abjection as inspired by the maternal body, its connection to nature and its reproductive functions, specifically imagery surrounding the womb and the archaic mother that inspire fears of incorporation and uncanniness. The film also deals with male fears of castration and of female sexuality and seems designed to invoke male fear, disgust and horror. This could be seen to be disempowering the male spectator and placing them instead in a 'feminine' position, especially since terror itself is seen as a feminizing experience. Peter Hutchings argues that the female monster in horror "appears to operate primarily as a passivity-inducing device, a means of rendering male characters inadequate and helpless" (Hutchings, 1993: 90). Thus the male viewer would seem to be, once again, enabled to adopt a position of masochism, confronting the terrifying and unpleasant, but still, paradoxically, finding a perverse pleasure in this confrontation. The next question remains, what does this mean for female spectatorship and pleasure?

Creed argues that while the theories surrounding the monstrous feminine may reinforce the notion that female sexuality is abject, it still opens up a space in which femininity is not passive, but active, even aggressive.

> The presence of the monstrous-feminine also undermines the view that the male spectator invariably takes up a sadistic position because the monster is always male […]

> Furthermore, male victims are frequently placed in a masochistic position via the female body. (Creed, 1993:156)

This begins to open up a new space for femininity and masculinity that undercuts the traditional binaries of active/male and passive/female.

Whilst this may be so, one must still ask oneself how this specifically relates to gender politics within *The Blair Witch Project*, after all, although the male psyche may be on the line, so to speak, through confrontations with male anxieties, it is still the female characters who 'pay' for this confrontation. Although all three characters disappear in *The Blair Witch Project*, it is specifically Heather whom we watch falling apart. Whilst the two male characters, Joshua and Michael, do experience terror, theirs is quiet and introverted in relation to Heather's expression of terror. It is Heather who virtually breaks down and goes from being a confident, controlled woman, to a hysterical wreck, crying continuously. It is Heather who turns the camera on herself, tears and mucous running down her face, as she takes on the responsibility for their situation and begs for forgiveness.[9] Here, as with Carol Clover's argument surrounding 'possession' horror films, "the standard scheme puts, or at least seems to put, the female body on the line only in order to put the male psyche on the line" (1992:86). Or, as Tania Modleski suggests, submission and defencelessness are projected onto the female body to be experienced by the male spectator at a 'safe distance' (1986:163).

The monstrous-feminine, Creed posits, also opens up the possibility that the female spectator, instead of being positioned masochistically, may be able to find some pleasure in identifying with the sadistic female monster. However, this still does not wholly address the fact that women, the female spectator included, are being aligned with abjection, with feelings of disgust and horror. How does is affect the female viewer when she is presented with images that inspire revulsion and horror, when those images are connected to her own gender identity? What pleasure can be found for the female spectator in the conception of her own sexuality and gendered being as monstrous?

The Blair Witch Project may open up spaces for the subversion of 'typical' gender roles, allowing the possible fluid shift between identifications, allowing men and women to occupy both active, sadistic positions *and* passive, masochistic ones. However, whilst this may be

subversive at this level, the film continues to reinforce the “ideological project of the horror film” (Creed, 1993:83), as it aligns femininity both with monstrousness and the need to be controlled and punished. Thus, Modleski’s assertion would seem to be borne out: “it *is* the female spectator who is truly deprived of ‘solace and pleasure’ [my emphasis]” (1986:163).

Chapter 5:
Conclusion

If horror films, as some theorists such as Robin Wood (1986) believe, enunciate the unconscious desires and fantasies of society, then *The Blair Witch Project* would seem to point to masochism as one of the primary preoccupations of contemporary Western 'mass culture'. The pleasure that the film would appear to provide contradicts the assumption that the horror genre is centered the celebration of pain in its sadistic form. Instead, the film bears out the work of recent theorists such as Carol Clover, Barbara Creed and Linda Williams, among others, who have begun to explore modern horror as a repository for the exploration of far more masochistic desires. "It seems to me that, inasmuch as horror exists as a punishing, subjecting (but also pleasurable) experience, then 'masochism' is its primary effect" (Hutchings, 1993:87). Masochism, as has been discussed, is seen as perverse and deviant, contrary to 'healthy', 'normal' sexual drives and desires. It is exactly this preoccupation with masochism, the indulgence in and celebration of unpleasure, that situates the film within the realm of perverse pleasure. Instead of questioning how, *despite* the apparent lack of conventional pleasures (such as distance, control, the gratification of expectations and the attainment of the drive for knowledge), *Blair Witch* could be enjoyable, the pleasure of the film would seem to *depend* upon the subversion of these very pleasures.

The Blair Witch Project appears to bear out Tania Modleski's assertion that the horror genre has the potential to equal high art in its political efficacy through attacking false, insipid pleasure. Indeed, *Blair Witch*, as this report has aimed to demonstrate, does not just undercut conventional pleasures, but goes so far as to attack them openly. This attack, as has been explored, takes place on a number of levels: through spectatorship, convention and the presence of abjection.

Voyeurism and vision are fore grounded by *The Blair Witch Project*, but instead of reaffirming thinking around spectatorship that emphasizes pleasure in distance and sadistic control through the gaze, it has been demonstrated that the film re-deploys the gaze entirely. The film achieves a far more masochistic aesthetic visually, as the spectator's desire to see and know is not gratified, but punished. The usually omnipotent and violent 'I-camera' convention of horror is rendered

powerless and becomes, instead, unstable and claustrophobic. Carol Clover points out that in horror audiences often "take it in the eye" (1992:180), however, in *The Blair Witch Project* it is not an excess of vision that proves painful, but the complete subversion of scopophilic desire. The film's use of the hand-held camera is limiting and often disturbing in its unsettling, erratic vision. But it is ultimately the fact that nothing conclusive is ever seen that punishes the viewer the most. Whilst vision is often equated with knowledge and control, especially in the horror genre where seeing the threat means one is able to categorize it and mobilize defenses, it is precisely this connection that *Blair Witch* is undermining. The spectator is denied knowledge or control and is instead placed in a position of insecurity and helplessness; an attack at the level of the eye, violating the viewer's own sense of vision. This is significant because psychoanalysis has theorized that

> a threat to the eye has unconscious associations with other forms of dismemberment, including, above all, castration, and that at stake in these associations is the disintegration of the self, the collapse of consciousness. (Sandro, 1987:24)

This threat to consciousness and the denial of knowledge is reinforced by the film's ending. Instead of giving a sense of unity and fulfilling the desire for meaning, providing moral and psychological safety through a 'true' ending, *The Blair Witch Project* leaves its audience in a state of confusion. Not only is the monster undefeated, but no insight is gained either into the disappearance of the students, or into the nature of the threat. Evil remains unintelligible and goes unpunished as the film leaves us with more questions than answers, the last shot serving as a veritable 'black hole' of meaning. Whilst it is in the nature of horror to savor suspense and the build-up of a narrative, *Blair Witch* is ultimately masochistic in its complete denial of a climax, the last scene undercutting fulfillment and leaving the audience unsatisfied. Unsatisfied, that is, unless the desire is a masochistic one that craves re-absorption and ultimate unity with the oral mother. As has been discussed, the last image of the film alludes to the presence of the archaic mother, threatening to pull the audience into the "place where meaning collapses" (Creed, 1993:29), into non-differentiation and death.

The Blair Witch Project is also potentially masochistic in its re-deployment of conventions and its subversion of expectation which, once again, undercuts the desire for meaning and control. The film destabilizes conventions of the horror genre, engaging the audience in pleasurable

game-play with conventions and then completely undermining the anticipation generated through these horror practices by breaking all the rules. This is epitomized by the film's representation of its female protagonist, Heather, who would conventionally be the 'Final Girl', a strong, resourceful character who defeats the monster. Instead, although coded visually as the 'Final Girl', Heather ultimately collapses emotionally and is sadistically punished, censored for her curiosity and her assumption of an active gaze. Carol Clover argues that the 'Final Girl' conventionally provides the male spectator with the possibility of exploring taboos and passivity through acting his screen surrogate. However, identification with Heather becomes ultimately threatening as, through her death when the screen goes blank, the spectator may be drawn into the dark abyss and the loss of subjectivity as the 'safe distance' of the screen is negated.

The conception of cinema, especially horror, as a safe space to encounter taboo and vicariously experience fear is undercut by *The Blair Witch Project's* further subversion of convention and expectation. The film replicates a documentary aesthetic and, by exploiting (mis)conceptions surrounding documentary as the domain of truth, blurs the boundary between fiction and reality. Although audience members might have been aware of the film's fabrication, I would argue that even a slight sense of ambiguity would be enough to blur what are most often clear boundaries. This confusion around veracity tampers with the audience's ability to mobilize 'correct feelings' around terror; feelings the viewer usually activates in order to achieve a sense of an aesthetic, 'safe' distance. Distance is denied and the viewer's sense of the boundaries between fiction and reality and of a whole/unified self is violated as *Blair Witch* pulls the spectator into the realm of the snuff film in which violence, taboo and reality converge. Instead of a 'secure' site of transgression, the horror film becomes threatening and 'excessively close', potentially unsettling the viewer long after the actual film is finished.

The dominant pleasure at work in *The Blair Witch Project* would thus appear to be a fascination with unpleasure and the subversion of more 'mainstream' pleasures such as control, distance sadism, closure, acquiring knowledge, the gratification of expectation and the reassurance of the viewer's sense of a whole, unified self, both psychically and physically. Instead, the film would seem to undermine these pleasures, reveling in passivity, powerlessness, confusion and abjection

that impinge on the spectator. This would seem to echo Steven Shaviro's assertion that pleasure in spectatorship lies not in sadistic distance, but in masochistic abjection.

> I enjoy this sordid spectacle only at the price of being mimetically engulfed by it, uncontrollable, excitedly swept away. I find myself giving in to an insidious, hidden, deeply shameful passion for abject self-disintegration. (Shaviro, 1993:103)

Perhaps this masochistic aesthetic was precisely the reason why *The Blair Witch Project* struck such a chord in popular culture and also why it had such passionate, and varied, responses.[1] The film has been praised by some and reviled by others; if the film had only been 'bad' or unsatisfying, it would have sunk without a trace. Instead, the film (paraphrasing from Kristeva's discussion surrounding abjection), 'beseeched, worried and fascinated desire' (1982:1), as it became an integral part of popular culture, at least for a time. Part of that interest would perhaps lie in the film's novelty, in the 'gimmick' of its internet hype and in the innovative presentation of fiction as reality. However, I would argue, even it's 'gimmicks' cannot account for the depth of the film's impact: it is an unconscious fascination with masochism and unpleasure that resonated with audiences. *Blair Witch* would seem to reveal a desire for pleasure that expands mainstream conception of what constitutes pleasure in film.

The Blair Witch Project would seem to be progressive and subversive, attacking conventional pleasures and engendering a desire for perversity. However, as has also been demonstrated, *Blair Witch* is, on other ideological levels, still conservative. For example, *The Blair Witch Project* may also be regarded as masochistic in the way it enacts a ritual confrontation between the viewer and abjection, making the spectator confront the boundaries and limits both of the physical and symbolic self. Yet, it is the way the monster and abjection are equated with femininity that perpetuates myths surrounding sexual difference and gender. *Blair Witch* ultimately articulates male fears surrounding femininity that may, potentially, deny the female spectator pleasure as her gender is equated with abjection and monstrous otherness, disseminating conservative gender representations.

The question of gender and ideology is also significant in terms of regarding masochism itself as progressive. As we have seen, through discussions surrounding Tania Modleski's writings (1986), pleasure is not neutral, but often tied into gender and ideology. In a similar way

masochism is also tied into these same structures. Carol Clover speculates that the reason the masochistic aesthetic has been disregarded by film theory, particularly feminist theory, for so long is that it would not forward the feminist cause and would go against politics that underline the equation of masculinity with sadistic violence. Clover suggests the concept of male masochism would "unsettle what is apparently our ultimate gender story" (1992:227). Therefore, masochism would seem to open up new arenas: it allows the articulation of different subjectivities, ones that could enunciate a desire for unpleasure, suspense and masochism. It also allows for the re-thinking of spectator positioning, challenging the assumption males are always active and sadistic, and females always passive and masochistic.

It is, however, also important to realize all positions have their restrictions. Whilst masochism may open different avenues of thought and may be challenging in some ways, it also begins to articulate its own limitations. Masochism has, traditionally, been coded as feminine. Clover points out that Freud regards masochism as 'natural' and 'accepted' in women and it is only when it manifests itself in men that it becomes a perversion and is called "Feminine Masochism" (Freud as cited in Clover, 1992: 217). Indeed, even masochism's presence is seen by Clover as a "feminine or feminizing experience" (Clover, 1992:217) for the male spectator, which would seem to further entrench binaries that equate femininity with passivity. Peter Hutching argues that whilst horror seems to be primarily about inducing passivity in its male audience through masochism, feminizing them, it is this very mechanism that 'normalizes' masculinity.

> In other words, by temporarily and in a very circumscribed way of 'feminizing' the male spectator, horror emphasizes the 'normality' of masculinity, thereby reassuring the male spectator. (Hutchings, 1993:92)

Hutchings goes on to argue that the pleasure in the horror film for the male spectator arises because it appeases man's problematic relationship with masculinity, operating in the gap between symbolic masculinity and real masculinity as is experienced by the spectator. He speculates that it is the process of feminizing the male viewer that serves not only to reconfirm power, but also to "cover over the fact that this spectator's hold on power is structural and provisional rather than personal" (Hutchings, 1993:92). Thus, masochism, which is seen by some theorists such as Barbara Creed and Carol Clover as a way of advancing gender politics, may also, ultimately, re-inscribe patriarchal power.

I would, overall, agree with David Keyes in that *The Blair Witch Project* is a redefining moment in the horror genre (www.rottentomatoes.com), a moment that re-imagines our connection to reality and re-deploys tired old conventions. It would also seem to be re-imagining contemporary pleasure through its emphasis on masochism which may present a space for the formation of new subjectivities and for pleasure that is not based on sadism and control, but instead desires passivity, abjection and masochism. However, this pleasure does not entirely re-conceptualize gender positioning, with masochism perhaps further entrenching binaries that equate femininity with passivity and otherness; with 'perversity'. The film would seem to enunciate an unconscious which is still delineated by fear and repression of sexual difference and reflects the ideological construction of women through film's unconscious mechanisms. However, it is imperative to note that instead of pure masochism, the possibilities of more complex play between masochism and sadism and between genders is possible. I would argue that what is important is that the film does begin to open up these spaces in popular consciousness and, through its 'flaws' in gender ideology, may serve to show us the way ahead for the horror genre itself.

End Notes

Chapter 1: Introduction

1. The film has even spawned its own collection of 'copycat' films collected together under *The Bogus Witch Project* (2000).
2. I will also be referring to the film's sequel, *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch II* (2001) in later chapters. However, I will not be considering this a part of the multi-media background of *Blair Witch*, especially because it differs so much stylistically, being far more 'conventional'.
3. Firstly, repression, defined simplistically, is the psychoanalytic term for the "active process of keeping out and ejecting, banishing from the consciousness, ideas or impulses that are unacceptable to it" (Kuhn, 1990:109), these impulses may be painful or emotionally charged, or even regarded as perverse and deviant, and thus are banished into the unconscious. An example is Freud's assertion that the child's incestuous desire for the mother, which is taboo, has to be repressed in order to find a 'correct' love object and this may result in masochistic fantasies of being beaten as punishment for this desire. Robin Wood examines the speculation that horror allows the spectators to deal with repressed elements of the psyche. He draws on Freud, outlining two levels of repression, 'basic repression' which is universal and necessary, enabling human development, the development of thought and memory processes, recognition and consideration of others and the postponement of gratification. The second level is 'surplus repression', repression which is "specific to a particular culture and is the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within that culture" (Wood, 1986:71). Wood notes that the things repressed in Western mainstream culture include: sexual energy, bisexuality, children's sexuality and female sexuality. Repression may also be seen as "the suppression of awareness for the sake of some specific dimension of psychic functionality" (Carroll, 1990:176).
4. The theories surrounding horror's purpose briefly outlined previously tend to argue that horror itself is conservative: that although an encounter with these repressed elements is brought about and horror may be seen as transgressive, these elements tend to be suppressed once more as the film ends. These theories are only one possible answer. James Donald (1989) and Vivian Sobchack (1987), amongst others, argue that horror films sustain a more

transgressive approach, where, on a simple level, the boundary between human and non-human is not re-defined, not closed.

5. Although the concept of sadism itself has been subject to many exhaustive debates, especially within gender theory, I will be using sadism here in the sense that Linda Williams does, as "the aggression that underlines patriarchal power or in a more specific sense as the sexual perversion that haunts masculine sexual identity and controls a quintessentially masculine desire to see, know, and control" (1989:201). A larger, more encompassing, discussion of this term is beyond the scope of this essay.

Chapter 2:The Eye/I of Horror - Spectatorship and Vision

1. For a further discussion of the theme of vision in Hitchcock's work, see Tania Modleski's The Woman Who Knew Too Much (1998): an interesting discussion around the exploration of women, and misogyny in Hitchcock's films. Modleski particularly discusses the system of looks at work in films such as *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), *The Birds* (1963) and *Psycho* (1960), which foreground voyeurism and self-reflexively implicate the viewer. Psycho is also an important example of the 'I-Camera' as the camera 'attacks' Marion.
2. For an in-depth description of these theorists and their arguments, see Susan Hayward's Key Concepts in Cinema Studies (1996).
3. To extend this discussion, see John Berger's Ways of Seeing (1972) where he discusses the phallocentric nature of the gaze.
4. This desire coincides with the rise of, what Linda Williams terms, the "Frenzy of the Visible" (1989:36). She argues that with the emergence of photography and cinema, human vision began to be mediated by these optical apparatus that enabled the viewer to see more than what was possible by the naked eye. The ability to see that which was previously unseen led to an intensification of the desire to see, particularly to see the previously hidden or the forbidden. Williams defines the 'Frenzy of the Visible' as the, "logical outcome of a variety of discourses of sexuality that converge in, and help produce, technologies of the visible" (1989:36). Although the majority of Williams's discussion centres on pornography, she draws a comparison between this and slasher horrors: "like pornography, the slasher film pries open the secrets of normally hidden things" (1989:191). For example, the female body which is sliced and torn open.

5. *The Blair Witch Project*'s sequel, *Book of Shadows*, uses the 'I-Camera' far more conventionally, especially in a scene where tourists are killed at Coffin Rock, disemboweled violently by a subjective, hand-held gaze. However, I would argue that this should not be considered as 'straightforward' sadistic pleasure. Instead it is through the scene's choppy editing and sense of dislocation, the suddenness with which we see the violence, that the audience "takes it in the eye" (Clover, 1992:180), as will be discussed in depth later in this chapter.
6. This is largely reminiscent of the hype surrounding *The Exorcist* in which images of the possessed child Regan caused viewers to vomit (Carroll, 1990:18).
7. The concept of abjection will be defined and expanded on later in this discussion to examine conceptions of monstrousness and how they are tied into femininity.
8. For Freud perversions are "sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim" (Silverman, 1992:185). Thus, most of the pleasures of cinema that we have been discussing all be regarded as 'perverse pleasures'.
9. Here I am using the male Oedipal masochism as the example deliberately. It is interesting to note, something that will become important in our later discussion of the political efficacy of masochism in *The Blair Witch Project*, that masochism is considered 'natural' for women by Freud. The suffering of masochism, in the Freudian conception, is called 'Feminine Masochism' and is a male perversion (Clover, 1992; Silverman, 1992).
10. For a further, more complete discussion of this phenomenon, see 'Time Travel, Primal Scene and the Critical Dystopia' (Penley, 1989) or 'Primal Conditions and Conventions: The Genre of Science Fiction' (Dervin, 1990).
11. This is especially interesting in terms of our discussion of pleasure, as William Paul says, horror itself is a genre that allows viewers to deal with repressed feelings: "the horror film is especially appropriate for dealing with 'primitive' feelings, feelings that arise during the earliest period of our lives. It is perhaps for this reason that every horror film involves a kind of regression, a return to an earlier form of thinking and a short-circuiting of the rational understanding of life we develop as we mature" (1994:337). Repression here is used in a simple sense, but we will be dealing with it extensively in a later chapter.

12. It is important to note that although Clover argues that the monster will be defeated and incapacitated, the threat contained, this isn't necessarily always the case. Horror often, as shall be discussed later, leaves the threat hanging and effaces closure.

Chapter 3: Convention, Expectation and Subversion

1. An in-depth discussion of the complex debates surrounding the use of the term genre is beyond the scope of this essay. For a comprehensive outline see Susan Hayward's Key Concepts in Cinema Studies (1996) where she outlines the history, ideology and theories around the concept, as well as the difficulties inherent in a term that is often seen as unproblematic by film theorists.
2. Theorists have come to challenge documentary's equation with 'truth' and this link between documentary and 'reality' is a highly contested area, the discussion of which is outside the bounds of this essay. Bearing this in mind, I will continue with the assumption that in the 'popular' social mind documentary is still, more or less, the domain of truth and that the following argument still applies. One reason that I will be making this 'leap' is the efficacy with which *The Blair Witch Project* deceived the audience into believing its veracity by drawing on documentary conventions. In a later quote we shall also see that this thinking about the correlation in the public mind between reality and documentary informed the producers, Greg Hale and Robin Cowie, themselves.
3. Cinéma Vérité was the French segment of the observational documentary cinema movement, led by film makers such as Jean Rouch who produced *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), whilst the American Direct Cinema was led by Robert Drew, who is seen as its founder. Other notable contributors to Direct Cinema included Don Pennebaker, Richard Leacock and Al and David Maysles. Although the two styles deviated from each other in their methods and to the degree in which they intervened in the filming process, they shared a mutual aim, to film 'the truth'; to mirror the world authentically, without distortion or interpretation.
4. Cinéma Vérité drew on the theories of Russian filmmaker and theorist, Dziga Vertov who saw the camera as the perfect eye, "From the viewpoint of the ordinary eye you see untruth. From the viewpoint of the cinematic eye […] you see truth" (1984: xvii). Vertov believed that film could un-problematically capture and mirror back the world to audiences. He

believed that the image itself was 'truth' and that one could film 'real life', or "Life caught unawares" (as cited in Ellis, 1989:33), and thus named it 'Kino Pravda', the 'Cinema of Truth'. Vertov saw the camera, unlike the 'flawed', limited human eye, as a perfect mechanical eye that could record reality without limitations or mistakes. It was through the camera that Vertov posited that humanity could "see without limits" (Vertov, 1984:41).

5. To this end proponents of Cinéma Vérité would only use real people, 'social actors', film on location and there would be no scripting. A key technical development in sound camera synchronization at the time made it possible to film on location with a fairly mobile camera. However, the American advocates of this observational, 'truthful', style criticized Cinéma Vérité for its use of interview and direct address. While the French filmmakers used interview as a tool to reveal reality, and drew attention to the presence of the filmmaker and the process of filming itself, Direct Cinema sought to efface the role of the filmmaker entirely, denying their own personal perspective.
6. Perhaps, on one level, this draws attention to the artificial nature of these conventions. There is no inherent connection between a shaky, hand-held camera and truth, instead these are learned customs, as the Nichols quote in the above paragraph alludes to. MacDonald and Cousins point out: "These days, C*inéma Vérité* is a vague blanket term which is used to describe the *look* of a feature or documentary films – grainy, hand-held camera, real locations" (1996:251). Harvey O'Brein argues that the film's blurring of the line between performance and reality "exposed the manipulation inherent in this genre, and demonstrates our willingness to accept certain visual conventions (hand-held camera, black and white, poor quality video images, foul language), as signifiers of authenticity" (O'Brein, 1999). Perhaps *Blair Witch* challenges, to a degree, the complicity between text, producer and viewer in sustaining genre.
7. Carroll does point out that many viewers are not just unaware of the tacitly agreed rules of film viewing, but are unaware of even playing a game at all (1990:74). For an interesting discussion of this phenomenon, see Steve Neale's article 'You've Got To Be Fucking Kidding!: Knowledge, Belief and Judgment in Science Fiction' (1990) in which he investigates the correlation between special effects and their effects on the audience's belief. He examines the layers of knowledge, belief and judgment where spectator knows the representation is a fiction. Neale investigates how John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982)

reinforces the suspension of disbelief, despite the audience's knowledge that it is fiction, brought on my far-fetched special effects.

8. Another thing to note, briefly, is that in calling into question the distinction between fantasy and reality, between the known and unknown. It could be argued that the film is in the realm of the fantastic. Victor Todorov posits that the key to the fantastic is hesitation, when confronted by an inexplicable phenomenon, between a natural or supernatural explanation. For an in-depth analysis of this, see James Donald's discussion (Todorov as cited in Donald, 1989:11). Donald remarks that, "A pure work of the fantastic would indeed retain the hesitation and uncertainty until the last moment and even 'beyond the narrative'" (Donald, 1989:18), just as *Blair Witch* does, maintaining this hesitation for as long as possible. Also of interest, in light of our discussion of masochism, is Virginia Wexman's argument that "The confusion between inner and outer reality engendered by 'the fantastic' reflect modes of experience that are psychologically infantile, recalling a narcissistic period of development in which the individual was unable to distinguish from the world around it" (1987:33). The fantastic, in other words, takes its audience "back to a time of powerlessness and of traumatic confusion between fantasy and reality" (1987:41).
9. This is important for overall pleasure since, Carroll posits, horror itself is about affecting, shocking and scaring us; "Being thrilled, albeit aesthetically relieves the emotional blandness of something called modern life" (Carroll, 1990:167). As Steven Shaviro argues, as discussed in the previous chapter, horror's appeal lies in its ability to stimulate us; make us scream, jump, or give us goose bumps, offering us "an immediacy and violence of sensation that powerfully engages the eye and the body of the spectator" (1993:26).
10. Carroll maintains that even though the reaction to horror films is not genuine fear, but "quasi-fear" (1990:71), horror still has genuine effects: the creeping horror, the goose bumps and the screams, these are real reactions to the felt fear. He likens this, again, to a game, just "as one can be intensely engaged in games in general" (Carroll, 1990:71), so one can one still be affected by 'art-horror'. He argues that this is much like 'thought-theory' where thoughts are powerful enough to evoke emotions, to argue that the viewer does not have to necessarily confront something in reality to be affected, just the thought can terrify us. For example, one need not fall down a cliff to be frightened of it happening, the idea of it is enough. This link's to James Donald's discussion of Freud's analysis of female patients' tales of rape and

paternal seduction which may or may not refer to a real event but, either way, had as much impact on the patient's psychic life as if it had actually happened. Elizabeth Cowie argues: "What Freud show is that it is irrelevant to consider whether the event was fantasised or real, or whether the woman wishes it to be real, for the fantasy refers not to physical reality but to psychical reality" (as cited in Donald, 1989:138). From this, one can conclude that it is not necessarily the narrative's status as fantasy or reality that is important here, but the fact that its affect is real.

11. Carroll also mentions that the relationship between fiction and emotion is not always straightforward, that the feelings this 'game' arouses are not always voluntary. Although the viewer may deliberately suspend disbelief, the emotions fiction provokes are always volitional as the viewer may not have the choice to disbelieve and dispel the emotions; as in his reaction to *The Exorcist* (1973) by which he was "overwhelmingly struck" (Carroll, 1990:74). This correlates to Steven Shaviro's argument, examined in the first chapter, that cinematic viewing is a process of contagion in which the viewer is powerless not to see; the image "violently impinges on me, one that I can no longer regard, unaffected from a safe distance" (1993:46). Carol Clover also argues there is not necessarily a safe distance, that the assault on the viewer, on the eye in particular, is so real that it blurs the distinction between real and 'not-real' creating physical affects as "we take it in the eye" (1992:202).
12. "In general, the term 'Slasher' is used to define those films in which a psychotic killer murders a large number of people, usually with a knife or other instrument of mutilation" (Creed, 1993:124).
13. See the discussion in the next chapter linking the abject and uncanny to the setting itself, namely the woods and the Witch's house.
14. I find Badley's reading interesting in light of previous discussions surrounding Steven Shaviro's concepts of spectatorship and masochism. Similar to Shaviro, who writes "Scopophillia is then the opposite of mastery […] Voyeuristic behaviour is not willed or controlled by its subject: it is a form of captivation" (1993:49), Badley seems be arguing that there is a lack of control even in genre itself. Instead of the sense of power pre-knowledge of the conventions should produce, the viewer has no control, especially over their physical reactions. Similarly Shaviro contends that, even knowing the image is 'unreal', cinema still has powerful effects on the body of the spectator, which, as discussed in the chapter on

spectatorship, provides fuel for his proposition that film viewing is at heart a masochistic experience.

15. This can be likened, although it is not the same, to Tania Modleski's discussion, outlined in the chapter on spectatorship, of Freud's analysis of the 'fort/da' game which illustrates how "the individual learn to take pleasure in pain and loss" (Modleski, 1990:69).
16. Clover also traces horror's similarities to folktales and oral narrative in its "free exchange of themes and motifs, the archetypal characters and situations, the accumulation of sequels, remakes, imitations" (Clover, 1992:111).
17. This assertion will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter as it addresses the convention of the 'Final Girl'.
18. I am using the male pronoun to refer to the monster/killer here because, as has been discussed, the killer is seen to be a "non-specific male killing force" (Robert Ebert as cited in Creed, 1993:125), largely for the phallic and sadistic nature of the attack and weapon. However, it is important to note, as Barbara Creed does, that no matter what the gender of the killer, he/she is still feminized.
19. This is a convention played with in Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996), a film which Deneka MacDonald discusses as an example of a "pioneering attempt to deconstruct the contemporary horror film" (MacDonald, 2002:1).
20. Clover argues that it is important to note that most, although not all horror films, return the viewer to the status quo (1992:222).
21. Clover asserts that it is through the 'Final Girl' that cross-gender identification may take place, allowing the male viewer to be passive and feminine (1992:175). She argues that horror is far more victim-identified that it is given credit for, and that it allows fluid character identification between monster and victims, with gender as more of a permeable membrane than a fixed boundary. Clover stresses that the cross-gender identification allowed by the 'Final Girl' is subversive in that it begins to question the male gaze and theories of masculine mastery by acknowledging that males aren't automatically relegated to active, sadistic positioning and females to a passive, masochistic one. Linda Williams, on the other hand, challenges Clover's assertions by suggesting that when the 'Final Girl' looks back, she too becomes monstrous; "She becomes, in other words, not so much both male and female as neither male nor female" (1989:208). Just as Vera Dika notes, "she is both like the killer in

her ability to see and to use violence, and like the victims in her civilized normality and in her initial inability to see" (1987:90), so Williams criticizes this notion that automatically (once again) conflates the feminine with the monstrous. Williams says that the 'Final girl' and 'reactive gaze' may not be quite as subversive as Clover suggests because these "theories of bisexuality are not considered apart from larger relation of power that devalue femininity and ultimately repress male masochism" (1989:206).

22. This is, of course, complicated in that the audience to some degree know that Heather is not totally triumphant. For audiences exposed to the pre-publicity on the internet and the mock-umentaries, they would have known that all three students remain missing. I would, however, still argue that the convention remains strongly in place, that audiences would expect the footage to expound on their disappearance, perhaps motioning towards Heather's final confrontation with the Blair Witch.
23. Although it is arguable what use the map could have been as they were already in the supernatural territory of the Blair Witch, where she has control over nature.
24. This is especially true as Josh could be argued to be the victim that falls to the Witch, showing the audience her capabilities. However, the audience never sees anything and his disappearance and subsequent fate is never satisfactorily explained.

Chapter 4: The Witch, the Woman and the Woods - Femininity and Monstrousness

1. Annette Kuhn, in her analysis of the repression of female sexuality, notes that this projection is often done through the unconscious processes of displacement and condensation. The repression may return in visual disguise; 'condensation' where a single idea comes to contain all the emotion associated with a group of ideas, or multiple signifieds, or 'displacement' where the emotions are transferred from the original idea they were associated with to other idea, sparing the subject the pain of the original source of the emotion (Kuhn, 1990:109-110). For example, the figure of the Witch (which we will examine in detail later in this chapter) can be said to be terrifying because she becomes a condensation of the fear of female sexuality and power, of nature and of the unknown, among other things. On the other hand, the 'haunted house', typical of the Horror genre and which will also be examined later, becomes terrifying because fear of the mother and her generative powers, of the womb, become displaced onto the image of the house. Important here to our later discussion, as

Elsaesser (1989) posits, when a repressed issue returns in displaced and condensed forms, forms "so distorted and disguised by repression that we fail to recognize its psychological source" (Castle, 1995:7), this often induces feelings of uncanniness because this issue is unfamiliar, being distorted, whilst still being strangely familiar. The uncanny and its relationship to the figure of the witch and the maternal body will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

2. This violence is shown through point of view shots in which the viewer in placed in the position of the various characters who are slaughtering the tourists and may seem to reiterate the idea of spectatorship as sadistic and controlling. However, as we have seen, this is not that simplistic, sadism alone doesn't define spectatorship.
3. *The Blair Witch Project* is explicitly linked to the history of witch trials in the United States, a history that is referred to both in the film's setting and in the Dossier (Stern, 1999). This is a history of violence where thousands of women were put to death for supposedly worshiping the devil and practicing black magic. This history, despite the number of deaths, occupies a surprisingly little space in popular culture. I would argue that whilst the film does draw attention to this omission, at the same time it merely reiterates the central mythic structures related to the figure of the witch. As MacDonald (2002), in her criticism of the film, notes: *The Blair Witch Project* relies on our imaginations and our cultural perceptions and expectations to reinforce the fear we feel for her, although we never see her, it is our own imaginations that make her a tangible force in the narrative; "Its power lies not just in our own imaginations […], but in the labels and rules that we accept as gendered" (MacDonald, 2002:5). She goes on to say:

   > *The Blair Witch Project* is horrific because it confirms society's worst fears: witches are evil, they kill small children, they perform sacrifice and murderous rituals, and they live in the depths of the unknown places we surely do not want toenter. *The Blair Witch Project* reproduces these fear for its audience, and in so doing, the film joins a long history of reaffirming both the negative image of the witch and our erverse attraction for such images. (MacDonald, 2002:2)

   Most importantly, these negative images are absolutely bound up with femininity itself and merely perpetuate these myths of gender.
4. Clover points out that gender confusion is rife within the slasher genre, with female heroines masculinized, as seen in the discussion surrounding the Final Girl in the previous chapter, and both male victims and monsters feminized (1992:13). Clover argues that killers in slasher

films tend to be trapped in infancy, their sexual drives perverted and violence used as a substitute for sex. This lack of active sexual power renders the killer feminine. On a similar point, Hutchings also points out that male victims are often marked as un-manly or feminine (1993:90).

5. For an in-depth discussion of vagina dentata, see Creed's discussion in which she relates this concept to the 'slasher' film in which the figure of the knife-wielding heroine, who usually defeats the monster, is not a 'pseudo man', but a castratice who arouses anxieties around castration. Creed argues that the figure of the castratice has been repressed in Freudian psychoanalytic theory because it "challenges Freud's view that man fears woman because she is castrated" (1993:127).
6. *The Blair Witch Project*'s sequel, *Book of Shadows*, also deals extensively with abjection, specifically the link between reproduction as abject and to women as 'open to possession'. In the film one of the characters, Tristan, is ostensibly possessed by the Blair Witch. Possession is regarded as abject because the boundary between self and other has been transgressed and is another of Creed's categories of the monstrous-feminine. What is important is that she is pregnant, the maternal body being abject as we will discuss later, and she miscarries, bleeding profusely. It is Tristan who is specifically linked with blood, maternal blood in particular. Creed points out that in certain cultures there is the superstition that woman's menstrual blood it terrifying as it gives the woman terrifying powers. "In some horror films the witch's supernatural powers are linked to the female reproductive system – particularly menstruation" (Creed, 1993:77). This signals that the Witch and Tristan are connected by monstrousness right from the beginning of the film: it is Tristan's maternal body, her ability to reproduce, that makes her monstrous, she is already abject, 'open'. Carol Clover notes that possession films are "stories that hinge on psychic breaking and entering – that plunge us repeatedly into a world of menstruation, pregnancy, foetuses, abortion, miscarriage, amniotic fluid, childbirth" (1992:82), that being 'open' to possession is specifically coded as feminine, no matter what the gender, with the possessed person being "physically opened, penetrated" (1992:101). Possession stories,

   > concern themselves with bodies penetrated, invaded and colonized – bodies convulsed by some alien force – they also attest to an archetypal horror story. And insofar as that story turn on bodily orifices, holes – natural passages to an inner space – it would appear to be a story built around the female body. (Clover, 1992:80)

Creed also observes that the women who are possessed are usually those that refuse to take up their proper place in the symbolic order and has broken with her proper feminine role;

> Woman is constructed as possessed when she attacks the symbolic order, highlights its weaknesses, plays on its vulnerabilities; specifically, she demonstrates that the symbolic is a sham built on sexual repression and the sacrifice of the mother. (1993:41)

This can specifically said to be true of Tristan who, although married and pregnant, is unsure about her pregnancy, even though her husband, Stephen, is overjoyed. In a conversation with Kim she says she is six weeks pregnant, doesn't want to keep the baby, but doesn't know what to do. Later we see her drinking and smoking, waving away her husband's warnings about harming the foetus. She later has a dream in which she takes a towel down to the nearby river and pushes it underwater. Blood bubbles up furiously from below the water, accompanied by the sound of a baby crying. When Tristan wakes, she miscarries the baby and in hospital says, "I dreamt I hurt the baby", "I'm sorry I didn't want it. I'm sorry that I lost it". In one sense then it could be argued that she is possessed because she won't accept her place in the symbolic order, as a mother, and is therefore punished, especially as that at the end she is murdered by her husband.

7. In *Book of Shadows*, the Witch is even more bound up with the notion of controlling the woods. The characters are plagued by 'visions', such as the presence of vicious dogs, or the destroyed van, only to find them disappeared or whole again, blurring the boundary between fantasy and reality.
8. There are two modes of the uncanny, both having similar effects: the first, which this discussion will centre on, arises when that which has been repressed returns in an altered form, is recognizable, but also unfamiliar at the same time. Freud uses the word 'unheimlich', which means simultaneously homely and un-homely. Another origin of the uncanny is when 'primitive' beliefs are confirmed. Terry Castle, in his discussion of the uncanny, says it emerged, or was invented, in the 18th Century. It was through this period's quest for reason, to systemize and regulate knowledge, that this uncanny anxiety and strangeness could be felt. Freud writes: "our primitive forefathers once believed that these possibilities were realities and were convinced they actually happened. Nowadays we no longer believe in them, we have *surmounted* these modes of thought […] As soon as something *actually happens* in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs, we get a feeling of the uncanny" (Freud as quoted by Castle, 1995:9). Thus, for example,

whereas our forefathers believed ghosts really did walk the earth, and would accept them, their appearance to us would result in a feeling of uncanny, of dread and horror, because we have overcome our belief in them.

9. The same pattern is repeated in *Book of Shadows*, in which, while all the characters are put under pressure, experiencing terror and confusion, it is the two female characters that are killed. It is Erica's body, blue and naked, that is found in the closet, and it is Tristan who is possessed and finally hung by her neck. More specifically, I would argue, it is these two women's threat to patriarchy that is punished. Erica claims she is a witch that, as we have seen, brings up fears of feminine power, and she is sexually confident and aggressive. Tristan too is a threat to patriarchy, resisting her role as mother, her body 'open' to possession.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

1. One must also bear in mind that the film's popularity may also have stemmed from a desire in audiences to be part of the *Blair Witch* phenomenon; that viewers went to see the film in order to feel a part of the 'collective' as it swept over popular culture. Perhaps viewing the film gave a sense of belonging, where they viewer could attest, "I was there". However, this is a discussion that, while relevant and interesting, must take place in another forum.

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