

J. P. Telotte

The Blair Witch Project Project

Film and the Internet



In discussing the structure and workings of the New Hollywood, Janet Wasko cautions against attending too much to the sort of stories it is producing or the myths it so readily fosters about how those movies are being made. As she notes, "By accepting the myths or concentrating primarily on aesthetic aspects of film technology, corporate influences on film activities, as well as the actual power structure of the industry, can be obscured."¹ It is a caution that can serve us well when thinking about one of the most popular movie phenomena of recent times, *The Blair Witch Project*. A cheaply produced, independent horror film made by a couple of film school graduates from the low-profile University of Central Florida, it grossed nearly \$150 million in 1999, garnered favorable critical commentary, turned its female protagonist into an overnight star, and earned both sequel and television deals for its co-writers/directors. And some measure of that public embrace of the film has to do with its apparently humble independent origins: its approximately \$35,000 production cost, unsophisticated look, and unknown actors. It is, after all, manifestly unlike the high-budget Hollywood gloss with which we are so familiar and which has tended to dominate the recent box office. Yet, as the comment by Wasko might suggest, the story of *The Blair Witch Project* and its seemingly overnight success is far more complex, and that success a far larger lesson about what is happening in the U.S. film industry, particularly in its marketing efforts, than would initially seem to be the case.

In an era that has become practically defined not only by the effects of "mass media" but by the interweaving of many media, films today seldom really stand alone. Each new release operates—if it is to be at all successful—within a complex web of information sites: radio spots, theatrical trailers, various sorts of television promotions, billboards, product tie-ins, and, increasingly, the Internet. Certainly, the last of these is the newest marketing ploy, yet it is one that combines

the lures of many more traditional advertising techniques: the graphic pull of posters, the hyped language of the old-fashioned press release, interviews with stars via live-time chat rooms, publicity stills, sneak previews via downloadable video clips, offers of movie-related giveaways, and selections from film soundtracks. Today, in fact, almost no major film is released unaccompanied by its own carefully fashioned "official" Web site—one that can provide an extremely cost-efficient yet information-intensive medium for promoting the movie—and often by a variety of fan-created and fan-driven unofficial sites as well. The official Web site especially not only offers potential viewers the sort of information or lures that would, after the fashion of traditional film advertising, make them want to rush out and see the film. It can also effectively tell the "story" of the film, that is, as the film's makers and/or distributors see it and want it to be understood. For it can frame the film narrative within a context designed to condition our viewing or "reading" of it, even to determine the sort of pleasures we might derive from it. This establishing of context, this seemingly secondary "project," has been one readily acknowledged factor in the larger success of *The Blair Witch Project*, and one that merits further consideration for its comments on marketing in the contemporary film industry.

Before we examine this secondary project, however, we need to note other factors that came into play in the case of *Blair Witch*. When Artisan Entertainment picked up *The Blair Witch Project* for distribution after its screening at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival for approximately \$1.1 million, it continued a pattern for that minor-major studio of cheaply acquiring projects with an easily identifiable audience and then extensively promoting them to achieve a predictable if modest profit. This pattern is illustrated by such films as *The Limey* and *Pi*, the latter of which also benefited from an elaborate Web site. In the instance of *Blair*



Witch, that promotional project certainly relied heavily on an extensive elaboration of a Web site already developed by the film's producers—hardly an uncommon add-on to the publicity push by this time, but one that has been given most of the credit for the film's success. Yet most accounts of the film's promotion overlook the extent of its *conventional* marketing project, one which included television advertising, especially on MTV; a series of ads in major college newspapers, alternative weeklies, and magazines with a young readership like *Rolling Stone*; and widely distributed posters for the “missing” principals of the film. As Dwight Cairns, Vice-President of Sony's new Internet Marketing Strategy Group, notes, “People tend to forget that the offline campaign . . . was so well integrated into what they did on the Web—the missing posters of the unknown cast, the TV spots perpetuating the myth that missing footage was found and that they should go to the site to see more. The Web was just another channel to deliver the message.”² Indeed, Amorette Jones, head of the Artisan marketing campaign for *The Blair Witch Project* and a veteran of marketing at such major studios as

Universal, Columbia/Tri-Star, and MGM/UA, acknowledges a hardly modest \$20 million marketing campaign for the film that included a series of ever-more-elaborate trailers, some of which were pointedly tied to playdates for *Star Wars: Episode One* in hopes of drawing in that same audience. As Jones admits, Artisan “did commercial things; we just did them in a non-commercial way.”³

This admission of the extent of the film's conventional publicity campaign perhaps helps to explain why other films have had trouble emulating the success of

Blair Witch. Creating a “fun” Web site to lure young viewers, after all, is a relatively inexpensive and easy path for advertising, one which even allows the studio to begin to gauge—through a “hit” counter—the extent of potential viewer interest. And given Artisan’s success, it is little wonder that other studios would try to follow suit, although as yet without similarly spectacular results. Marc Graser and Dade Hayes offer a partial explanation, noting that “calmer heads are realizing that the ‘*Blair Witch*’ site was not an added-on marketing tool, but was designed as part of the film experience—one that tapped into fans of the horror genre.”⁴ I would go a bit further and suggest that the selling of *The Blair Witch Project* and the telling of that film, its narrative construction, were from the start a careful match or “project,” one that better explains both the film’s success and why that success was so quickly and easily laid at the door of the now almost equally famous Web site.

Before pursuing this other project, the match between the filmic narrative and its electronic marketing, we first need to consider how such Web sites typically work, and thus why this Web site in particular might have played such a significant role in the film’s success, quickly inspiring other film companies to follow suit in an effort to reach a key audience demographic online. As I have already noted, almost every major release today is preceded by a site designed to build audience anticipation for the film and, even after it has been released, to support that interest by feeding viewers additional information (behind-the-scenes facts, technical data, playdates for various markets, even the opportunity to purchase film-related souvenirs), and later to open up yet another avenue for profits by marketing tape and DVD copies of the film.

A selection of Web sites for similarly-themed films released in the same general period shows several typical levels of presentation. Those for *The Haunting* and *Stigmata* (both 1999), like the majority of official Web pages, are largely advertisements with little animation, offering basic data about the story, opening dates, and advance ticket-ordering information. Replicating the films’ key advertising graphics against red or black backgrounds—colors obviously keyed to the films’ horror genre—they seem like little more than electronic posters. The official *Urban Legend* (1998) and *Deep Blue Sea* (1999) sites provide a slightly higher level of information. The former, against a black-and-gold background, lists showtimes, offers credits and “behind the scenes” images, provides a library of contemporary urban legends, and invites visitors to participate in a sweepstakes contest. The latter, against

a black-and-green background, offers images, text, and interviews with many of those involved in the production. Both are essentially press kits for the digital age, providing the sort of deep background typically found in their conventional counterparts. However, the Web sites for such films as *Lake Placid*, *House on Haunted Hill*, and *The Mummy* (all 1999) are far more complex affairs, not only providing the same sort of fundamental information—and measurably more—found in the previously noted sites, but also inviting a level of viewer interaction. These more elaborate sites all offer a storyline, cast list, background on the filmmakers, clips from the films, various electronic giveaways (such as downloadable screensavers and electronic postcards), chat rooms, and games keyed to the films’ plotlines, set against the generically familiar black or dark red screens that immediately establish the horror-film tone. Such sites invite their visitors to linger, to explore, and, often with a few simple mouse clicks, to call the sites—and thus the films—to the attention of friends; they try to be fun and to encourage visitors to share the fun by viewing the sites and then, naturally, seeing the films.

Of course, such linkage is precisely the purpose. Thus, even as sites like those for *Lake Placid*, *The House on Haunted Hill*, and *The Mummy* provide their own level of entertainment to visitors, they also ultimately point to the film experience and suggest that we see their narratives within a tradition of cinematic horror. *The House on Haunted Hill* Web page quickly announces that the film is “a spine-tingling remake of William Castle’s 1958 classic horror tale”; *The Mummy*’s site describes it as “a full-scale re-imagining of Universal Pictures’ seminal 1932 film”; and *Deep Blue Sea*’s producer, Akiva Goldsman, explains that the movie is a “classic old-style horror film.” While their games and on-line trailers afford net surfers a hint of the movies’ atmosphere and some brief entertainment, these sites, in keeping with the long tradition of movie advertising, are basically “teasers,” lures suggesting that the real thrills are to be found in the movies themselves—and in a *tradition* of similar movies. They *guide* our experience by situating their films in the context of the film industry and pointing to the entertainment power of the movies, particularly their special ability—one implicitly unmatched by the Internet—to transport us into another realm.

Artisan’s own ambitious marketing campaign, and especially its Internet strategy, seems to have been designed to employ an element of this contextualizing, while also moving visitors in a direction different from the advertising sites just described. In fact, it seems to

have been fashioned precisely to avoid the sort of situating at which these similar sites aim (including the hierarchical entertainment value of the movie itself that the established film industry would prefer to affirm), seeking instead to capitalize on the particular characteristics of this film. That campaign, which ended up as a television project as well, pitches the fictional movie as a documentary about three real student filmmakers who vanished while working on a documentary about a legendary witch near the town of Burkittsville, Maryland. The story unfolds through their own footage, accidentally discovered by student anthropologists a year after their disappearance and then pieced together by Artisan. The Web site that became the hub, although hardly the sole focus, of the campaign offered much additional material about the case of the missing filmmakers: information on the "Mythology" surrounding the *Blair Witch* legend, background on "The Filmmakers" who disappeared, a summary of "The Aftermath" of the disappearance, and a tour of "The Legacy" of these mysterious events—that is, of the various materials recovered in the search for the student filmmakers.⁵ All of these elements, the film's *back-story*, if you will, elaborately propagate the notion of authenticity, attesting to the film as, quite literally, a "found-footage" type of documentary rather than a fictional work, and more particularly, as a different sort of attraction than the movies usually offer, a reality far stranger than that found in any "classic old-style horror film." Rather, they suggest we see the film *not as film*, but as one more artifact, along with the materials gathered together at the Web site, which we might view in order to better understand a kind of repressed or hidden reality.

Thus *The Blair Witch* site, in contrast to those noted above, points in various ways away from the film's privileged status as a product of the entertainment industry. Or more precisely, its "project" is to blur such common discrimination, to suggest, in effect, that this particular film is as much a part of everyday life as the Internet, that it extends the sort of unfettered knowledge access that the Internet seems to offer, and that its pleasures, in fact, closely resemble those of the electronic medium with which its core audience is so familiar. *Blair Witch* co-creator Eduardo Sanchez has hinted as much when discussing the importance of his film's Web site. He offers, "It gave us a lot of hype for a little movie," while he also points to the fact that the site was effective primarily because it was so very different from other publicity pages with which Web surfers were familiar. Rather than "just a behind-the-scenes thing with bios," they aimed to cre-

ate "a completely autonomous experience from the film. You don't have to see the film to actually have fun on the Web site, and investigate it and get creeped out. And that's kind of what you have to do" with such independent films.⁶ While operating within what has quickly become an established, if still evolving, electronic genre—that of the official film Web site—the *Blair Witch* page does rather more. It seems pointedly designed to suggest a level of difference from other sites, and to imply as well that the film, precisely insofar as it is *like* the Web site, *differs* from other films, even those within the horror genre.⁷ While it does provide what might be thought of as a kind of gaming experience, it does so in a far more complicated way than other sites; moreover, its key emphasis is on the complicated and mysterious nature of a world that would inspire such an experience. Thus, the *Blair Witch* site offered to those who had not yet seen the film but who might have heard some of the hype, as well as to those who had already seen it, a path of further investigation and a source of other, similarly creepy sensations—in effect, a *different context* for viewing the film.

And even as the site suggests that we see this film differently from other, more conventional works, it also points to the key terms of that difference, the central strategies shared by both Web site and film. To isolate these effects and better consider their implications for the film, I want to draw on Janet Murray's study of electronic narrative forms, wherein she describes how such texts, generally much more sophisticated than a typical advertising site, usually rely upon three "aesthetic principles" or characteristic "pleasures" for their lure—what she terms "immersion, agency, and transformation."⁸ The term "immersion" refers to the "experience of being submerged" in the world of the text, and thus to a certain delight in "the movement out of our familiar world" and into another realm,⁹ such as the complexly detailed medieval world of a game like *The Legend of Zelda*. By "agency," she means our ability to participate in the text, something we "do not usually expect to experience . . . within a narrative environment,"¹⁰ but which is fundamental to the participatory investigation of a mysterious environment in a game like *Myst*. And "transformation" indicates the ability electronic texts give us to "switch positions,"¹¹ to change identities, role play, or become a shape-shifter—as freely happens in games like *Donkey Kong* and *Mortal Kombat*—within a world that is itself marked by a constant transformative potential. While not quite a game in the sense of those noted above, the *Blair Witch* site, largely because it does function as part of a larger narrative context, draws to varying

degrees on each of these pleasures, which, it forecasts to those who have grown up with the computer and the Internet, extend into the world of the film as well.

While employing the same sort of dark and suggestive color scheme as other sites, the *Blair Witch* page especially distinguishes itself by its power of immersion. Rather than pointing to the entertainment industry, it lures visitors into a world that is, on the surface, deceptively like our own, and even anchors us in that realm of normalcy with maps, police reports, found objects, and characters who evoke the film's target audience of teenagers or young adults (the missing student filmmakers and the University of Maryland anthropology class that, we learn, later discovered their film and various other artifacts). After establishing this real-world context and giving it authority, the site shifts from that anchorage into a completely "other" world, one of witchcraft, one connected to the repressed history of the mysteriously abandoned town of Blair, and one with a mythology all its own, attested to by a collection of woodcuts depicting witchcraft in the region and selections from the supposed book *The Blair Witch Cult*, which we are told "is on display at the Maryland Historical Society Museum." As site visitors move within that realm, they increasingly exercise an element of agency, exploring, like the missing filmmakers themselves, different dimensions of the mystery: gathering background on the region; pursuing the public debate about the missing students through interviews with Burkittsville locals, parents of the students, and college professors of anthropology and folklore; reading pages of Heather's diary; looking over evidence accumulated by the local sheriff, the anthropology students, and the private investigator hired by Heather's mother. Through this agency effect, wherein we sort through a wealth of clues in any order we wish and try to put the pieces of a puzzle together, much in the fashion of *Myst*, we determine precisely how much we want to be "creeped out" by the materials made available to us. And in that "creeped-out" effect, we glimpse both the site's limited version of "transformation," as well as its key difference from the film itself.

Despite the densely structured nature of this world and its invitation to navigate its cyberspace, the site never quite gives us a full range of that other "characteristic pleasure of digital environments," of transformation.¹² Here we cannot morph into another figure or become one of the three central characters; the best we can do is become the anonymous surfer of cyberspace or settle into the role of an investigator and adopt that posture as a satisfactory shift out of the self. The various interviews offered here—with, for example,

Bill Barnes, Executive Director of the Burkittsville Historical Society; Charles Moorehouse, a professor of folklore; or private investigator Buck Buchanon, among others—all place us in the typical position of the documentary audience, as recipients of the direct address of these speakers. To do otherwise, to allow us, even as a kind of investigative experiment, to temporarily "become" one of the lost students, would, of course, rub against the very texture of the film toward which this site does ultimately and so successfully point. For making the experience immediate rather than mediated could reassert a kind of cinematic context, reminding us of the extent to which subject position is always constructed by point of view in film, and would thus show the film not as another artifact, co-terminous with the site, but as a kind of game played with—or on—us by the film industry. Simply put, it would work against the film's reality context. More to the point, the site mainly hints at the power of transformation because that closely allied pleasure is the payoff at the core of the film itself.

The Web site's ultimate aim, of course, is to encourage viewing the film, to help build its audience, which it does so effectively not only by allowing us these electronic pleasures, but by suggesting we might also find them, and perhaps something *more*, a content for this creepy context, in the film itself.¹³ Indeed, what *The Blair Witch Project* offers is some variation on the thrills of its Web site, along with a surprising level of transformation. In fact, after a number of studios tried to emulate the Internet-heavy approach of *The Blair Witch Project*, usually without reaping the same benefits, many in the industry recognized that its success derived from the way the Web site and film function together, *share* certain key attractions. As Marc Graser and Dade Hayes explain, an initial industry frenzy to mimic the *Blair Witch* Internet campaign has given way to a recognition "that the 'Blair Witch' site was not an added-on marketing tool but was designed as part of the film experience—one that tapped into fans of the horror genre" in a special way.¹⁴

In his review of *The Blair Witch Project*, Richard Corliss notes two "rigorous rules" that, he believes, account for its effectiveness as a horror film: "It will show only what the team could plausibly have filmed, and it will not reveal any sources of outside terror—no monsters or maniacs."¹⁵ That same sense of a restricted and thus logical agency and of a real rather than fantastic situation into which we can move are also crucial to the Web site. In effect, they point toward some of the ways in which those issues of immersion, agency, and transformation, all central to the context the Web site

establishes, are key components of the film, contributing to its real-world context and conveying its specific pleasures.

The film offers us “no monsters or maniacs,” no horror-movie fare of mad slashers, incarnate devils, or outsized monsters, because it is trying to immerse us in a world that, to all appearances, is coextensive with our own. In fact, the young filmmaker Heather worries specifically about making her film look too much like traditional horror movies. “I don’t want to go too cheesy,” she says, in a way that echoes the site’s constant insistence on the real; “I want to present this in as straightforward a way as possible . . . the legend is unsettling enough.” In keeping with this attitude, the film begins with domestic scenes: at Heather’s house with Josh (“This is my home, which I am leaving the comforts of,” she says as the film opens); at Mike’s home as they pick him up and ask if they can meet his mother; at the grocery as they stock up on food for their excursion, the emphasis on buying marshmallows suggesting a typical scout camping trip. It then carefully moves us into another realm with the “ceremonial first slate” of the movie, used to introduce Burkittsville (which is, as Heather intones, “much like a small quiet town anywhere”) with interviews of locals in the town and with the scene in the motel room before the filmmakers head into the woods. This location is pointedly different—the cemetery against which Heather films her introductory remarks in 16mm black-and-white quickly establishes that—but it remains a fairly known, sufficiently commonplace world, one of shopkeepers, waitresses, local fishermen. But the narrative quickly shifts into a realm in which neither the students nor the viewers can ever quite get their bearings as the filmmakers “start out off the map,” repeatedly get lost, find they are going in circles, lose their map, and can make no sense out of their surroundings. And the shifting between black-and-white film and color video images only reinforces that disorientation. Finally, the climactic scene, in which Mike and Heather enter the ruined old house in the woods, recalls and mocks those initial domestic images of Heather’s and Mike’s homes with their implications of safety and security. We are simply left immersed in a world that has been completely transformed, one Josh had earlier, and quite accurately, summed up as “fucking crazy shit.”

If the Web page is driven in large part by agency, the film links that thrust precisely to the powers of transformation. As Murray reminds us, “the more realized the immersive environment, the more active we want to be within it.”¹⁶ Yet here, after a fashion long familiar from other horror films and their limited use of

subjective camera, agency is evoked only to be frustrated, creating a sense of helplessness that is fertile psychic ground for horror. Although we find ourselves moving about in this world through our subjective incarnation as the filmmakers, we exercise no real control; as in so many slasher films, and as the *Scream* films repeatedly note and parody, we cannot stop these teenagers from running out into the dangerous dark where their fates are cinematically sealed. In its use of this effect the film recalls an earlier, landmark essay in this sort of cinematic narration, Robert Montgomery’s subjective private-eye film *The Lady in the Lake* (1947). That film’s experiment with agency, we might recall, fell flat with audiences, as one reviewer’s frustrated feeling explains: “You do get into the story and see things pretty much the way its protagonist, Philip Marlowe, does, but *you* don’t . . . get a chance to put your arms around Audrey Totter. . . . After all, the movie makers, for all their ingenuity, can go just so far.”¹⁷ Here, though, the “pleasure”—along with the frustration—of agency dissolves into transformation, as we do indeed “become,” by turns, Josh, Heather, and Mike, sharing their points of view and often even exchanging identities and point of view within the same scene, as one character’s vantage through the color video camera shifts to that of another, filming in 16mm black-and-white, almost as if we were “team-playing” a video game.

That instability allows us to shift and share sympathies, as when Josh, filming Heather, upbraids her for getting them lost, while it also allows us another register of feeling when, from her subjective vantage, we see the familiar scenery that indicates they have gone in a circle, and the faces of Josh and Mike accusingly look to Heather. That same systemic instability allows as well for our acceptance of the shifty environment in which these events transpire, for our sense of a world that seems to operate from different principles and to speak in an indecipherable language of rock piles, stick figures, scrawled symbols, and strange voices. Transformation, especially via the extended subjective shot, then, becomes a key impulse that drives *The Blair Witch Project*, and a link as much to the realm of contemporary electronic narrative as to traditional horror films.

What may be just as significant as these simple alterations of extended subjective shots, though, is the film’s self-consciousness, which constantly pulls us back from the typical film experience as if it were trying to reach for a more realistic context, one beyond the camera and its limited field of vision, one perhaps more in keeping with the Internet and its seemingly trans-

parent access to the world. For while the camera is a device that appears to let us capture the real, to chronicle in “as straightforward a way as possible,” it also constrains our experience by restricting what we can see, as is literally the case when Josh, Heather, and Mike run out into the night and we can see only as far as the limited light on their camera. Thus Josh tells Heather that he knows why she likes the video camera: “It’s like a totally filtered reality.”

In fact, the film ultimately challenges, even attacks our relationship to the cinema, the technological in general, and their usual filtering effect. For its three filmmaker-protagonists eventually prove ill-equipped for dealing with a natural and transformative world: their car can only take them so far; their map and compass prove useless; their cameras and sound equipment, designed to record the real, offer no insulation against a mysterious, perhaps even supernatural realm. And by funneling our relation to the natural world, even to one another, through the technological, the narrative evokes our own sense of being lost in the mediated contemporary world. Attacked for her attachment to the camera—an attachment that makes possible the film itself, we cannot forget—Heather is told to turn it off, put it down, help figure out their position and determine how to get out of it. Her reply, “No, I’m not turning the camera off. I want to mark this occasion,” seems the response of someone who is already fully lost to and within the cinematic. From behind the camera, just as back in her home, she feels temporarily secure, pointed in a safe direction, able to document the “creeped-out” experience of her companions while remaining immune from its menace. And yet she is in the midst of that experience herself and unable, or unwilling, to face her own contingent situation, to see herself as lost and endangered here. Consequently, the extreme close-up of her face—cold, shaking, nose running—at the film’s climax when she turns the camera on herself, works another and most effective “transformation” here. It shows her, and perhaps by extension us as well, as a frail contemporary human, immersed beyond all insulation by her technology, involved to such an extent that she can no longer find a safe distance, transformed from sceptical reporter to helpless victim of this quaint bit of local folklore.

In describing the success of *The Blair Witch Project*, Libby Gelman-Waxner has also linked the film’s technological bent and its successful computer-based promotion. As she comments, its success must be “partially attributed to the heavy promotion of the movie on the Internet, and that makes sense: It’s a movie for men

and women . . . who prefer to see the world entirely through technology—it’s nature downloaded.”¹⁸ That is, it seems to present us with a kind of raw human experience framed by technology, a technology that allows us a safe, almost aesthetic distance on events—much as we might find on the Internet. That distance, with its built-in controls and a carefully established context, does seem a key to the film, albeit one whose import she does not quite fully gauge. For while that sense of distance suggests the film’s packaging for Internet consumption, it also opens onto the film’s own critique of a mediated environment, particularly of the cinema, essential to its context of difference. Perhaps it goes without saying that today’s moviegoers, situated within a pervasive multimedia environment, experience the cinematic text differently, even much more sceptically than other generations of moviegoers. Certainly, the success of the *Scream* films suggests as much. But the link I have explored here points not simply to the measurably different ways in which we are now viewing and decoding those texts, but also to how our viewing experience and capacity for such decoding depend on a whole different register of experience, how various voices assist in constructing our experience, even constructing our critique of that experience. With *The Blair Witch Project*’s project, we can begin to gauge the dimensions of that construction, begin to make out what is so often obscured by mechanisms that are changing both the movies and our experience of them.

Paul Virilio has recently described the postmodern experience as like living in “the shadow of the Tower of Babel,”¹⁹ not simply as a result of the many and different voices with which the multimedia environment bombards us but because of a certain dislocation that accompanies those various voices. For the electronic experience, he believes, with its tendency to bring together many and different places, to bind us within what he terms “glocalization,”²⁰ also leaves us without a real place—decentered and lost. *The Blair Witch Project*, along with its Internet shadow, seems to have effectively captured, and capitalized on, this sensibility. For it recalls the nature of the typical electronic document, the hypertext, which consists of a series of documents connected to one another by links; that is, it is a text of many fragments but no whole, no master text. And by virtue of its very lack of center, its absence of what Murray terms “the clear-cut trail,”²¹ the hypertext invites us to find our own way, even to find some pleasure or profit in its very decenteredness. That absence of a center—or the lostness which the

hypertext user shares in part with the three protagonists of *Blair Witch*—is simply part of the great capital of the Internet experience, something it typically barter with, plays upon by alternately denying and opening onto it. Here it is the stuff that can effectively “creep out” an audience. It is also something that the movie industry is quickly taking the measure of in its larger project of providing the postmodern audience with its peculiarly postmodern pleasures.

With this essay, more than simply describing the relationship between film and Web site, the product and its marketing, I hope to shed some light on the contemporary film industry. In today’s wide-open media marketplace, the small, virtually unknown filmmaker often seems to function as successfully as the big studio in finding a venue for his or her work. Certainly, the proliferation of independent film festivals, the opening-up of direct-to-video distribution possibilities, the appearance of media outlets like the Independent Film Channel on cable television, and even the industry-fearing Internet distribution of digitized films all support this notion and, in truth, lend it some substance. The well-made, small-budget, independently produced, and star-less movie does have a chance to be seen, picked up by a national distributor or cable outlet, and then offered to a wide audience. Yet reaching that wide audience remains a troublesome project, one with which the power structure of the industry is growing familiar, and for which it is constantly developing new strategies. These strategies then must take into account the changing nature of the entertainment form itself, particularly the increasingly substantial role of the computer and its offspring, the Internet—a medium that also threatens, much as television did, to supplant the film industry, in part by offering its own pleasures to a young audience that has grown up with electronic narratives. As Murray reminds us, “The computer is chameleonic. It can be seen as a theater, a town hall, an unraveling book, an animated wonderland, a sports arena, and even a potential life form. But it is first and foremost a representational medium, a means for modeling the world that added its own potent properties to the traditional media it has assimilated so quickly.”²² And, I would add, it is a medium that, through the Internet and much as film has traditionally done, has begun to assert its own model for the world. It powerfully affirms its own authority, its own truth, its own priority at affording access to the world.

J. P. Telotte teaches in the Literature, Communication and Culture Program at Georgia Tech.

Notes

1. *Hollywood in the Information Age: Beyond the Silver Screen* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 19.
2. Quoted in Marc Graser and Dade Hayes, “No Scratch from ‘Witch’ Itch,” *Variety*, Feb. 28, 2000, p. 1.
3. Quoted in Nicholas Maiese, “*Blair Witch* Casts Its Spell,” *Advertising Age*, Mar. 20, 2000, S8. Much of the commentary here on the advertising campaign derives from this piece.
4. “No Scratch from ‘Witch’ Itch,” p. 1.
5. The four categories of material cited here correspond to the names of the four links that the main Web page offers visitors. Each one opens onto an elaborate display of images, text, streaming video, and sound files that essentially extends the experience of the movie, or as I suggest here, even offers an alternate, if parallel, experience to the film.
6. Prairie Miller, “*Blair Witch Project*: An Interview with Eduardo Sanchez,” <http://allmovie.com/cq/x.dll?uid=12:53:34/pm&p=avg&sq/=m1vll/176036>.
7. In this context, see Wasko’s reminder about the influence of television and the cable industry on film aesthetics; as she notes, “the way a film is shot and edited definitely has been influenced by new distribution outlets such as video and cable.” *Hollywood in the Information Age*, p. 38.
8. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 181.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
13. As a measure of effectiveness, we might note the Nielsen ranking of the *Blair Witch* site. As reported in *Variety*, the Nielsen NetRating for the week ending August 1, 1999, ranked the site the 45th most popular on the Web and second among movie sites, trailing only that of *Star Wars: Episode One—The Phantom Menace*. The typical visitor in this period averaged more than 16 minutes at the site. See Richard Katz and Susanne Ault, “‘Blair’ Fare a Big Hit on Web,” *Variety*, Aug. 10, 1999, p. 13.
14. “‘Witch’ Hunting: Studios Fail to Match ‘Blair’ Flair on ‘Net,’” *Variety*, Mar. 2, 2000, p. 1.
15. “There’s Something About Scary,” *Time*, July 12, 1999, www.time.com/time/magazine/articles/0,3266,27736,00.html.
16. *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, p. 126.
17. Anon. review of *The Lady in the Lake*, *New York Times*, 24 Jan. 1947, p. 18.
18. “‘Witch’ and Famous,” *Premiere* 13.3 (1999), pp. 80-81.
19. *Open Sky*, trans. Julie Rose (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), p. 145.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
21. *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, p. 91.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 284.

