



## The Blair Witch Project: Metatextual Layers of Subverting the Female Gaze

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### Abstract

While recent scholarship has discussed the gendered subject/object relations within *The Blair Witch Project* and Heather's victimization by the male gaze of the horror-genre's camera, my work rebuts and clarifies the level through which this victimization is occurring. I argue we must understand how BWP functions on three different metatextual layers—Heather's documentary, the implied documentary of *The Blair Witch Project*, and the Myrick and Sánchez mockumentary—to see the ways in which Myrick and Sánchez have exploited spectator expectations of the horror genre to underwrite a critique of the genre's reliance on the villainization and objectification of women, both through the cinematic absence of the Blair Witch herself and the use of Heather as 'vanished' female filmmaker.

**Keywords:** found footage horror; film studies; feminist studies; narratology; documentary theory; metatexts



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## The Blair Witch Project: Metatextual Layers of Subverting the Female Gaze

Emily Moeck

The overwhelming financial success of the low-budget independent feature *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick & Sánchez, 1999), twenty years ago, sent cultural shockwaves across the global cinematic community that went on to spawn one of the most prolific sub-genres of contemporary cinema: the found footage horror. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's faux-documentary follows Heather, an amateur documentary filmmaker, and Josh and Mike, her two male crewmembers, on their journey into the backwoods of Maryland researching the local legend of a century-old witch. The film marketed itself as the edited product of real-life footage from two cameras claiming to be found after the disappearance of the three main characters—the 16mm film footage intended for Heather's documentary *The Blair Witch* and the Hi-8 video testimonial of Heather's video journal—fictitiously casting writer/directors Myrick and Sánchez as solely editors of Heather's failed project. Although most scholarship on *The Blair Witch Project* has focused on the innovative marketing strategies that collapsed the distinctions between fiction and truth surrounding the 'found footage' and the Blair Witch, I am more interested in teasing those differences apart in order to differentiate between the multiple ways of looking and spectacle in which Myrick and Sánchez are engaged. More specifically, I am interested in how the marketed documentary *BWP* exploits the gaze of the female filmmaker as a means to perpetuate dominant horror film traditions and the potential ways in which the feature film *The Blair Witch Project* is self-aware and subverts this exploitation in subtle but provoking ways.

Recent feminist readings of the film by critics Kimberly Jackson, Joseph Walker, and Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, are critical of the way *BWP* reduces the character of Heather (from her role as

filmmaker) to the typical victim/object of the horror spectacle. And yet none of these scholars have been critical of the ways in which Heather herself, and her documentary project, engage and conform to dominant, patriarchal ways of looking. Furthermore, little to no scholarly attention has been paid to clarifying the metatextual layer through which Heather's victimization is perpetuated. It is only once one understands the ways in which *The Blair Witch Project* functions on three different metatextual layers—Heather's documentary *The Blair Witch*, the implied documentary *The Blair Witch Project*, and the feature film *The Blair Witch Project* written and directed by Myrick and Sánchez—that one can understand the potentially subtle ways in which Myrick and Sánchez are ultimately critiquing the horror genre and the audiences' spectatorial infatuation with the vanishing female.

This paper will begin through the exploration of *The Blair Witch Project* through the narrative lens of Heather's documentary, *The Blair Witch*, and the different filmic gazes deployed by Heather through the use of the 16mm and Hi-8 color footage and her attempts to both conform and oppose the phallogocentric modes of looking/being seen in her own search for subjecthood (Mulvey, 1975, p. 62). From there, I will assess *The Blair Witch Project* through the lens of its implied documentary construction that utilizes cinema-verité techniques to subvert Heather's private footage into a public 'woman as object' narrative to produce a genre-conforming horror. Finally, I will look at the metafictional feature *The Blair Witch Project* and the ways in which Myrick and Sánchez potentially complicate the female subject/object relations put forth by the implied documentarians in their editing techniques and soundtrack, particularly through a close reading of the ending sequence and the ways in which the underlying narrative plot potentially diverges from the affect of the editing techniques. Through this analysis I understand the ways in which Myrick and Sánchez have exploited spectator expectations of the horror genre to critique the genre's

reliance on the villainization and objectification of women, both through the cinematic absence of the Blair Witch herself and the use of Heather as filmmaker turned self-blaming victim.

In Laura Mulvey's seminal work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), she argues pleasure in looking has always been split between active/male and passive/female where the "male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly." Although one might initially understand Heather's chosen role as documentarian as an empowered act in which Heather repositions the role of female into the active subject/gazer (Jackson, 2013, p. 57, Walker, 2004, p. 168), I find it interesting to note she has chosen a subject matter for her film that is deeply rooted in the demonization of femininity. If Heather casting herself as director is pitching herself into the active role of subjecthood, then her first subjective act is to enact a witch hunt, ratifying the historical demonization of women and amplifying its audience through the medium of film. Heather's endorsement of this phallogentric history can further be seen in her hiring two men as her sound and camera crew, and her willingness to present herself as a gender-conforming object in front of the 16mm lens—she applies lipstick and takes off her jacket to reveal her form fitting top before each rehearsed shot. When cameraman Josh writes the film's first slate, he insists that she "kiss it," to which she does and replies, "first slate marked by my lipstick." Through this act Heather has quite literally marked her project with the projected male fantasy of the female figure. Additionally, her expository mode of documentary relies on her altering her vocals into a performative docu-voice and upon the assumption that "fragments of the historical world" can be assembled into an objective truth (Nichols, 2009, p. 107). For Heather, this is the reassertion that Blair Witch—and all the objectification and historic demonization against women that she represents—exists.

And yet it also seems significant that the 16mm camera used to film Heather's *The Blair Witch* is a loaner camera. The opening sequence reveals Josh has rented it (or potentially stolen it) from his school with the hope of returning it after the weekend, suggesting the gaze Heather deploys through this lens may also be temporarily endorsed. If one can read Heather's 16mm gaze as a stolen gaze, temporarily adopted to gain a subject position within her phallogentric world, then her choice to also bring along her own Hi-8 video camera for an accompanying video journal can conversely be seen as her attempting to appropriate her own female gaze into her stolen subject position. Unlike the 16mm footage, whose initial subject is the Blair Witch, the main subject within the Hi-8 video footage is always Heather herself—she is both in control of the camera and its main subject. Jackson notes, "Heather retains the power [of the Hi-8 video]. The two men working with her are at best indifferent towards the camera and at worst feel victimized by it" (p. 58). If Heather's wielding of the Hi-8 lens has the ability to make both Josh and Mike feel victimized by its gaze, then it is because the Hi-8 lens' gaze is oppositional to their role as representing the male dominated eyes and ears of the official documentary project.

While the use of the Hi-8 video by Heather can be seen as an attempt to subvert her own professional engagement with film's conventional gendered ways of looking/being seen, the ultimate appropriation of the Hi-8 video by the implied editors of *The Blair Witch Project* results in something entirely different<sup>1</sup>. After all, the film that emerges from the cross-editing process of

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<sup>1</sup> I have adapted the term "implied editor" from Seymour Chatman's understanding of the implied author. As *The Blair Witch Project* was marketed as a found footage documentary, it consists of two textual layers: the film as an implied documentary where the implied editors' only role was to edit the footage from Heather's two cameras and add opening intertitles and, the second layer, the actual fictional film written and directed by Myrick and Sanchez

Heather's two camera footage bears only a slight resemblance to her proposed documentary *The Blair Witch*. Instead, the implied documentary, through the editing process, has reappropriated Heather's video journal Hi-8 footage as the primary documentary source while dismantling the original documentary's expository narrative contained on the 16mm black and white footage. The resulting compositional structure of the implied documentary corrupts Heather's subjective "I" gaze of the Hi-8 footage by shifting Heather into the primary role of passive/victim within the implied editors' new narrative.

This corruption of Heather's attempted subjectivity occurs right from the implied documentary's opening sequence, edited from the Hi-8 video footage (Heather's slated opening has been pushed fifteen minutes back). The opening frame is a blurry swirl of color and the diegetic voice of Heather saying, "It's already recording" while an unseen male voice replies, "You look a little blurry, man, let me zoom out on you... Okay, *I got you*," and the zoom concludes in a medium shot positioning Heather in the middle of the frame (emphasis mine). Although most of the Hi-8 footage is shot by Heather, the implied editors foreground a scene where an unknown man is in control of Heather's focalization—mirroring the role the implied editor will take for the remainder of what is to follow.

The opening shot's prioritization of Heather's image takes on additional implications when juxtaposed with the film's edited ending where Heather is [presumably] killed off frame, the 16mm camera she was holding ultimately sputtering out on the ground. The feminist film scholar Karen Beckman (2003) might argue that, by selecting these two extremely contrasting shots of Heather as the narrative's beginning and end, the implied editors align with a long history of female bodies being erased or portrayed as "utterly disposable" (p. 6). In Beckman's recent monograph,

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composed of the formal fictional structures of Heather's documentary footage and the implied documentary *The Blair Witch Project*.

*Vanishing Women*, she traces the development, popularization, and spectatorial fetishization of what she calls ‘the vanishing woman,’ a trope beginning in Victorian stage magic and perpetuated throughout film history. Beckman argues that theatrical women have been reduced to object-images in which society projects their anxieties and then makes them disappear (p. 19). While Heather’s initial filming of what was to become the opening scene was a means of establishing cinematic subjecthood, the implied editors of the documentary *BWP* were creating a product for a commercial audience. When the out-of-frame cameraman tells Heather “I got you,” he is not just saying he has captured her image in the camera’s gaze, he is saying he *owns* that image—that once Heather’s “I”-gaze has been subverted by the camera her image serves only to capture spectatorial anxiety and then disappear. In this sense, Heather *becomes* the Blair Witch that she herself was chasing and the implied documentary of *The Blair Witch Project* (and all its extratextual extremities, such as its missing posters featuring actress Heather Donahue) becomes a spectatorial invitation for another witch hunt.

If Heather has been reduced to an object-image for society’s projected anxieties by the implied documentary’s constructed narrative, then Heather herself seems aware of this inevitability when her death becomes imminent. In a shot edited into the narrative climax (and also featured on the majority of the film’s official marketing materials) Heather once again turns the Hi-8 camera onto herself in an extreme low-angle close-up that makes her features almost unrecognizable. In this moment Heather takes the blame for everything that has gone wrong on the trip and preemptively apologizes directly to the camera; she even accepts the blame for getting the crew lost, despite Mike already owning up to the fact that he was the one that threw out the map. Kimberly Jackson (2013) reads this climactic monologue of the film to be Heather’s self-realization that what she is really guilty of is the desire to become an “I” subject with a right to gaze (p. 60). Similarly, I would

add her desire to address this monologue directly to the future spectator also suggests a self-realization that—like the witch she once hunted—her “I”-gaze will ultimately be subverted into the trope of the vanishing woman, and she bears the weight not only of the anxieties of her crewmates, but those of her future spectators as well.

What this reading has not yet taken into account is that the implied documentary, its extratextual material, and Heather’s footage are all fictionalized constructions of writer/directors Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez. In fact, little to no scholarship has attempted to make a clear distinction between the implied documentary *BWP* marketed itself as, and the fictionalized narrative construction it actually is. And yet, this distinction seems paramount if we are to understand how the film, and its implied status as a documentary, operates within the horror genre. The way a documentary is structured regulates what will be shown, but it equally controls what will not. Louise Spence, in her monograph *Crafting Truth* (2011), suggests documentaries can at best only offer partial representations of the world, “Documentaries strive to prove that things are as they say they are. They build up arguments not by demonstrating a particular point but by disputing an existing one...we prove the legitimacy of our case by opposing something we believe is wrong, inaccurate, or illegitimate...The more flawed one proposition appears, the stronger the other will become” (p. 121). With this in mind, *BWP*’s multiple metatextual layers of documentary help to collapse the space between the story and the means by which it is told. Heather was attempting to make a documentary that would prove the existence of the Blair Witch against the established belief of it only as folklore, and, in this sense, the implied documentary of *BWP* positions itself as loyally helping Heather to achieve that end. One could easily argue that, commercially, the film did just that: twenty years later, the actress Heather Donahue describes how, for years after the film’s release, her mother and family continued to receive condolence cards in the mail, and a survey by *Vice* (Marthe, 2016) recently found half of people questioned



about the legitimacy of the Blair Witch legend still believe the lore surrounding her is factual, and, of course, there is the commercial success of the film itself, which grossed \$248 million against a \$60,000 budget—making it the fifth highest-earning independent film ever made. Indeed, the success of *BWP* as a horror film relied heavily on the spectators’ engagement with the material as *documentary*.

Most likely this is why early *BWP* scholarship focused so heavily on the aspects of the film that presented it as documentary—its innovative marketing strategies and directorial techniques that invariably collapse the distinctions between fact and fiction surrounding the ‘found footage’ and the Blair Witch legend. Such scholarship cites the film’s unprecedented coordinated marketing roll-out—a highly popular website on the Blair Witch legend, a TV special on the same subject, missing posters for the main characters (the film used the actors’ real names for their characters and the actors and their families were contractually bound to make no public appearances before the film’s release), and two books marketed as nonfiction dossiers—arguing the film’s commercial success could largely be attributed to this auxiliary material used to solidify a veneer of historical and cultural mythos around the film’s subjects outside of the diegetics of *BWP* itself (Reyes, 2016, p. 153, Heller-Nicholas, 2014, p. 168). However, more recent scholarship is quick to point out that, as a documentary—even accepting Spence’s notion that documentary can only offer partial representations of the world—*BWP* is a heavily flawed narrative, “there is no underlying narrative to *The Blair Witch Project* or to the Blair Witch metatext as a whole. Every answer only leads to more questions; every explanation is subject to contestation” (Walker, 2004, p. 169). If this is true, and I will argue that indeed it is, then the success of the implied documentary *BWP* hinges equally on the spectatorial expectations of the film’s reliance on traditional horror trope of suppressing the monster off frame instead of any documentary attempt at expository truth. To be more specific,

Myrick and Sánchez, by masquerading and marketing the fictional horror *The Blair Witch Project* in the documentary narrative mode—a mode that prioritizes a structural arc that builds towards an expository truth—overlaid with a horror plot that consistently confuses any semblance of truth making, the directors create a third metatextual level of subversion that exploits the conventions of the horror genre to showcase and critique the spectatorial infatuation with the vanishing female. To once again return to Heather’s two opposing cameras with the understanding of them as a narrative construct—the 16mm documentary footage on *The Blair Witch* that purposefully conforms to the phallogentric gaze and the Hi-8 video footage that Heather, as filmmaker, uses as an attempt to subvert this phallogentricity with an oppositional “I”- gaze—the opposing cameras can now be understood as a metatextual layer used to parallel the implied truths of the documentary *BWP* and the oppositional underwriting at work in the fictional film by Myrick and Sánchez. For, if documentary sets to “prove the legitimacy of [its] case by opposing something [one] believe[s] is wrong, inaccurate, or illegitimate...[and] the more flawed one proposition appears, the stronger the other will become” (Spence, 2011, p. 162), Myrick and Sánchez deploy the documentary mode as a means of exposing the horror genre’s reliance on a deeply rooted phallogentric gaze and, in so doing, ultimately make directorial choices that attempt to dismantle its power.

The most obvious level of underwriting this patriarchal power may be Myrick and Sánchez’s “method directing” technique, where, during production, the three actors were given the two cameras and dropped in the woods for eight days with only a GPS directing them to each night’s camping location. There, they would find a post-it note listing their characters’ next day desired trajectories. Heller-Nicholas argues that, due to this lack of direction in cinematography and script, the actress Heather Donahue becomes a co-producer of the final production (Heller-Nicholas, 2014, p. 97). While this may arguably be true, it only shifts the film’s engagement with the

portrayal of female as object-image to additionally incriminate Donahue. When casting the lead, Myrick and Sánchez chose Donahue for her experience within a New York based feminist improve group and Donahue claims she was drawn to the role because, “No size-8 woman was playing the lead in dirty jeans, with no mascara, with unwashed hair. No ingenue was willing to be so unfuckable. I was the most unfuckable ingenue to ever be in a blockbuster. But that was the thrill! The fuck-you thrill of it” (Meslow, 2016). This same Donahue, if Heller-Nicholas is right in elevating the actress to the role of co-creator, must also be held partially accountable for Heather’s self-blaming climactic monologue or the lipsticked kiss of the 16mm’s opening slate or the jacketless docu-performance within *The Blair Witch* footage. Myrick and Sánchez’s film is, then, not just a critique of the masculine deployment of the phallogentric gaze, it is also a critique of the Heathers that cast a full male crew and the Donahues who listen to their cameramen and kiss their opening slate.

And while one may argue that the above points merely to Myrick and Sánchez’s passivity in regard to the dominant patriarchal ways of looking, their critique can be seen as taking a more active role when one assesses *The Blair Witch Project*’s fictional plot structure. Although it is commonly assumed the three members of the film crew are killed by the Blair Witch, there is very little textual evidence to suggest this is true. The now-iconic ending shot POV shot from the 16mm camera held by Heather shows her descending the stairs into the basement of an abandoned house to find Mike, huddled, facing a corner of the room. Then, Heather’s diegetic scream echoes out, the camera is dropped, and the frame goes black. The visceral horror of the ending is typical of the genre, relying more on the anxiety of what is not represented in the frame than what is. For many spectators this, coupled with the veneer of documentary truth, is enough to conclude the two remaining characters have been killed by the Blair Witch. These spectators may even have coupled

the ending footage with the title *The Blair Witch Project* as a means of assessing the murderous culprit, yet the film takes its title directly from Heather's original documentary and is not directly relational to any plot point of the edited feature.

This narrative gap—between the observable actions of the final shot and the film's opening intertitles declaring the footage to be found in the woods and all three filmmakers missing—has been the debated topic of many fan forms for decades. The ending shot of Mike up against the corner of the wall harkens back to a 16mm interview, conducted by Heather, very early in the film where two fishermen tell of a man who was arrested for killing multiple children in this exact manner. And, only recently, this debate was taken up in scholarship by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (2014, p. 106) who argues there is ample textual evidence to suggest Josh, Heather's cameraman who goes missing halfway through the film, is the one who ultimately fulfills the ending role of the "so-called witch." While her defense is effective, the significance of both these claims is not whether they are true but how their substantial textual evidence points so easily to the gaping flaws within the vast majority of spectators' reading of the film. It is almost as if Myrick and Sánchez placed themselves in the role of Beckman's Victorian magician: all spectators' eyes are on the Blair Witch, but when they pull the sheet that covers her, we find she was never there in the first place. Instead, what remains is (no matter which theory you believe) the monstrous deeds of a man, displaced onto a female once again. Here the displacement is not by the direct hands of the magician/director, or by Donahue the actress, but by the spectators' blind desire to ascribe meaning to affect in a genre that has built its affect on the displacement and dehumanization of the female. "I got you," the unknown male voice of the cameraman tells Heather in the opening shot. If one believes Heller-Nicholas, this is quite literally what comes to pass.

Even if one is not as readily willing to ascribe a designated murderer to Myrick and Sánchez's ambiguous ending, there is at least enough textual evidence to conclude the directors are purposefully complicating the power of the patriarchal gaze. Whether or not Josh is ultimately responsible for the crimes attributed to the Blair Witch, Myrick and Sánchez write him out of the script less than halfway through the film. Heather is thus left prematurely without a cameraman and must now appropriate and take up both of her opposing lenses/gazes without the help of her male hire. Furthermore, what began as Heather's witch hunt—at the disappearance of Josh—becomes Heather's hunt for her cameraman. If the spectator and the implied documentary of *BWP* are both working towards inevitably displacing Heather into an object-image that will ultimately disappear, this plot choice subverts that displacement onto the character who holds and represents the 16mm footage and thus, for Heather, the patriarchal gaze itself.

Through the displacement of the cameraman for Heather's documentary on the Blair Witch, Myrick and Sánchez are problematizing the long history of 'phallogentric looking' within the horror genre. Adam Charles Hart, in his work on First-Person Shooters point of view in film and gaming (2019, p. 73), recounts the popularization of point-of-view shot within 1970s and 1980s horror films that came to be known as "killer POV." Much like horror's other tropes, killer POV's affective function was to unsettle viewers by withholding crucial diegetic information, mainly, who was the owner of the look. While formal parallels can be drawn between the point-of-view shots of killer POV and the point-of-view utilized in *BWP*'s 'found footage,' the spectatorial affect of the two shots has been completely reversed. In killer POV, often conducted through the steady camera movement of a pan or zoom, horror was concerned with subjecting the spectators to the "dominating, assaultive gazes of its [primarily male] monsters and killers" (p. 75). In this way, killer POV can most clearly be aligned with male-voyeur-subject modes of seeing. Myrick and

Sánchez's *The Blair Witch Project* was the first commercially successful film to make use of this alternate POV shot, the 'found footage' diegetic POV which shifts the spectators' alignment to more vulnerable modes of looking, "Just like the characters with whom [the spectators] vision is aligned, the [spectators] know that there is always something outside the frame to which they are not privy. In these works, [the spectator] is always aware that their spectatorial position is not a privileged one" (Hart, 2019, p. 75). In many ways, this forced spectatorial position resembles what Linda Williams (2002, p.61) earlier described as the woman-gaze popularized in horror films, "the woman's exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization." In found footage POV the voyeuristic-male look of the genre has upturned and replaced with the vulnerable victim most often associated with the feminine within the horror genre. In this way, the very cinematic form of Myrick and Sánchez's film mirrors the displacement of the cameraman and the phallogentric gaze the horror genre birthed.

Moreover, although *The Blair Witch Project* was the first commercially popular found footage film, many would shortly follow. Even so, what marks *BWP* as distinctly unique from other films in the genre that came before or after is the found footage POV is a handheld camera most frequently held by a woman (unlike, for example, the *Paranormal Activity* series which uses surveillance-style fixed angle footage). What makes handheld found footage POV unique, Hart (2019, p. 81) argues, is its ability to access a subjective character point-of-view that the traditional POV shot cannot, "the subjective camera intends to be read as being located 'inside the skull' of a character, registering emotional and perceptual perspectives in addition to literal placement... [in found footage POV] each shake and bounce of the image registers the physiology and psychology of the person wielding it." If one can understand the fictional film of *BWP* as Myrick and Sánchez's attempt to challenge the multiple ways the patriarchal gaze and the trope of the vanishing female is produced and consumed at all levels within the horror genre, their contribution

to the field is a POV shot that brings subjecthood even to the vanished camera-holding victim. More significantly, the found footage POV utilized in *The Blair Witch Project* is one that also forces the spectator into the vulnerable role of victim, laying the groundwork for dismantling the spectatorial male-voyeur-subject gaze long embedded in horror's modes of looking.

When revisiting the ending sequence through the lens of Heather's Hi-8 video as the greatest potential for a subjective camera, the understanding of whose subjecthood is being represented becomes complicated by the lighting, sound, and editing once both Mike and Heather enter the abandoned house. Mike, holding the shaky Hi-8 camcorder, leads the way into the house while Heather's 16mm footage captures him and Heather's diegetic voice pleading with Mike to stop. The cross cuts between the two cameras as the two walk towards the house make only Mike visible in frame—as he is leading and both cameras are facing the house—a gesture that complicates the reading of the Hi-8 footage as solely Heather's, while also nodding at Heather's own lack of control and bodily displacement. As the scene progresses to where both characters are indoors, the two cameras' visuals begin to appear interchangeable as the darkness of the house grains out the color of the Hi-8 footage. This not only disorients the spectators' ability to differentiate between the (priorly) patriarchal gaze of the 16mm documentary footage and (priorly) Heather's Hi-8 video journal, but also disorients one's ability to differentiate between whose POV the spectator is supposed to be aligned with from one cut to the next. This is also the only noticeable time in the film where the edited sound is no longer marketing itself as diegetic: the characters scream “Mike” and “Josh” repeatedly, but the sound level and direction do not always align with the corresponding POV being shown. While the sound of the male names seems to further work towards displacing Heather, the disorienting sound and visual associations conflate the two camera's gazes into one—a single, shaky, victim. Then comes the final 16mm shot, not of the monster-witch the crew (and

the spectators) were expecting, but of Mike in the corner and then the 16mm camera drops. If Heather's goal was to create two opposing cameras that both conformed and opposed the traditional patriarchal ways of looking, and the implied documentary framed the opening and closing shots to present Heather as a vanishing woman-object as a way of subverting her oppositional gaze, than the formal critique of the two subjective cameras conflating into one singular gaze of vulnerability—of shared victimhood without a visible villain—might be suggest the villainous evil of the horror genre lies primarily in its spectatorial modes of looking.

I'd like to turn one final time to the opening shot of the film, but now through the lens of the double subversion of Myrick and Sánchez as they attempt to unsettle the patriarchal ways of looking. The opening frame is a blurry swirl of peach and blue and the diegetic voice of Heather is saying "*It's* already recording." While the unseen man zooms out and Heather's voice declares "This is my home," the keen spectator will become remotely aware that the blurred colors of the frame are actually the colors of Heather's face, zoomed in so close it consumes the frame—a vanished subjecthood being told in reverse, pulled first from abstraction into focus. Not, one might argue, by the invisible male cameraman, but by the neutral *it* of the camera that has already been recording. In this first moment, Myrick and Sánchez are offering us a choice on how to proceed, to help decide if Heather is being pulled into subjecthood or beginning the heavily trodden path towards displacement. Beckman (2003, p. 189) writes, "Vanishing, then, teeters on the brink of both absence and presence, refusing properly to resolve itself into either one or the other; consequently, these terms repeatedly haunt the space of the vanishing, threatening to overtake it and undo its destabilizing force." In both the opening and closing moments of *The Blair Witch Project*, Myrick and Sánchez offer the spectator not only the choice of seeing the revolving absence and the presence of Heather, but also the absence and presence of the Blair Witch and the whole heritage of vanishing women that horror's gaze has historically displaced. If the "it" of the camera



is and always has been ‘already recording’—as Heather so aptly declares at the beginning and the sputtering sound of dropped film so readily declares at the end—Myrick and Sánchez suggest the spectator must decide who they want behind the lens.

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