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Back to index

Reflections on The Blair Witch Project

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Authors Introduction

This is a copy of an article which was written in the early autumn of 2000. It grew out of an earlier film review of *The Blair Witch Project* , analysing the huge success of the film in relation to its status as an independent film succeeding within the mainstream. It was also written from a specifically American Studies angle, suggesting ways that the discipline may look to use branches of film theory to further analyse successful American cultural products. This initial article was developed into a much larger polemic printed below. The name of the piece – *the summer night screams of pre-millenial America* – adopts the policy of film studies by analysing the success of *The Blair Witch Project* in the much larger context of the final summer of the Twentieth Century. The last summer of the *American* Century is the structuring theme of the article and, from this, a number of arguments about American youth at this critical juncture are presented.

Looking at the article now, some two years on, I feel many of the observations are pertinent and are worthy of consideration. Specifically, the article was written from the point of view of the American youth. It opens with the assertion from Heather Donahue that there is nowhere left in America to get lost in anymore. Post September 11th and America's position in the world radically altered with the war on terrorism, this generations innocence has been shattered. The supposed safety of the post-Cold War ear gone, this generation is now potentially facing its own Vietnam. The article also relates this innocence to wider concepts of American national identity, the frontier and the *No Logo* movement, initiated by Naomi Klein.

It is primarily an academic text, although it opens with the present tense and in the first person narration. Since the temporal context – the last summer of the century – is the structuring principle to the article it is foregrounded and implicated within the wider discussion.

Chris Cowan, November 2002.

"If you go down to the woods today....."

The Blair Witch Project and the summer night screams of pre-millennial America

By Chris Cowan

"We are not lost! It is very difficult for a person to get lost in America nowadays!" screams Heather Donahue in *The Blair Witch Project*. As a college graduate, spending the last summer of the twentieth century serving pizzas and diet coke on America's eastern seaboard, how could I disagree with Donahue?. After all, this is the last summer of the *American* Century and we are partying like its 1999. Short shifts, endless nights – the American Dream, here there and everywhere.

Driving through North Carolina on a hot humid day, I feel as though I am benefiting from all that America has achieved. Each summer, thousands of European students pile over the Atlantic Ocean longing for the American Dream just as their forefathers did. We are living the dream and we never want it to stop.

The endless road opens out before me, consumer utopias offering their brand of Nirvana everywhere I look. And what I want is a movie. As an antidote to a summer movie season dominated by phantom menaces, and the ghost of Kubrick, I'm gonna take a look at a new indie released that morning which I know nothing about, except three words: Blair Witch Project. Little do I know, that in the weeks and months ahead, those three words will turn into the movie event of the year…..

As time passed, and I returned home to Britain, my mind often wandered back to that summer's day in North Carolinaa and what Donahue had said. There I was, in the land of plenty, blue sky and open road all around me, yet for those terrifying ninety minutes, I was deeply lost in a dark, threatening America. People do get "lost" in America in the metaphorical sense of the word, where life in the world of drugs and crime take anonymous people every year, but in a small North Eastern Maryland town - "much like any other" - and not that far from the seat of government?. Could myself and Donahue be wrong?

As I further reflected upon my long, hot summer, a feeling overcame me that perhaps the summer screams of '99 might actually be echoes from an earlier decade. My mind wanders back to the summer of 1975….

A film graduate in that endless summer was adapting a New York Times Best Selling novel to the big screen on Martha's Vineyard. Plagued by a drunken crew and a plastic fish called Bruce, this shoot proved to be the training ground for a talent that would dominate American cinema for the next three decades. By the time Spielberg had unleashed *Jaws* into every beach resort, swimming pool and bath tub of the American nation, David Thompson remarked, with particular candour, that:

it's striking that in such an advanced country pre-occupied with GNP, with the interlocking machinery of capitalism, research science, social statistics and measurable alteration in the states of man, we should believe in a large rubber shark and the ominous musical theme current in the waters off Amity Island.[i]

Spielberg had unleashed his terror onto very specific American cultural terrain. As Thompson suggests, there was something going on inside the American conscience that gave Jaws its resonance thus allowing the country to be scared by some plastic and hydraulics. *Jaws* came to symbolise *all* that America had feared in the 1970's.

Daniel Bell[ii] defined this period in American History as "The End of American Exceptionalism", where the sins of the old world came to impinge on the new. Spielberg set about allegorising these sins in the fictional New England town of Amity Island and the film wrapped itself up in the prevailing discourses of the decade.

From the allegories of Vietnam, where swimmers were allowed to go bathing without being told of the dangers, to Watergate, where corrupt town mayors seemingly hid around every corner, Amity lived and breathed 70's America. In the character of Chief Brody, Spielberg even went as far as to engage with one of the decades other seminal works - *Taxi Driver* - since "the Chief" was forced to leave New York City due to the rising crime rate and threat of violence from people like Bickle.

More significant than the Vietnam and Watergate metaphors, however, was the way that Spielberg represented the American frontier and its corresponding ideological significance. The search for the new Frontier was a trend within American cinema of the 1970's with Star Wars being the paradigm. Amity Island was, in effect, America in miniature.[iii] Out there in the big wide frontier (the ocean), where the community earned its living, was a threat which required men of action to destroy it. And destroyed it they did, sending everyone home from the movie theatre safe in the knowledge that the Amity in us all would live to see another day.

Surely, however, the summer of '75 is not the summer of '99. This world of pre-millennial America is not the one that dealt with the fall out of the Vietnam War, Watergate and the death of the counter-cultural movement. Why, therefore, can I not help but feel something connects the rustle in the trees in '99 to the fin in the water of '75? Then the answer dons on me...

The connections between '75 and '99 prevail through the representation of the American frontier, since, as an ideological concept it has prevailed throughout American History. Those audiences who shrieked and screamed at *The Blair Witch Project* may have had different experiences to those who watched *Jaws*, but they still felt terrified because their fear came from the defining American experience of the frontier.

But why? As Donahue suggested, what can there possibly be, on the edge of the Twenty First Century, left to fear in the woods? Where can there be, in the most powerful and technologically advanced nation on earth, to get "lost" in?

I intend to posit some theories working towards a mode of critical engagement with the success of *The Blair Witch Project* that will connect it to the wider social, political and cultural context of America as it stands on the edge of the Twenty First Century.

The central protagonist of the film is the Maryland woods and the experience of watching the film provides the spectator with an obstructed view, persistently blinded to events unfolding by the home movie aesthetic and the trees. Indeed, the filmmaker's strong emphasis on landscape is reminiscent of the classical Hollywood Western where the background becomes not merely a context for the unfolding of narrative, but a character itself containing ideological significance.

One line of critical inquiry is that *The Blair Witch Project* should be studied as a 90's representation of the American idea of "The Frontier" showing that, for all the gains made in technology, it is the primitive discourse of survival in a wilderness environment that dominates the film just as it had done with *Jaws* decades previous.

The phenomenon of *The Blair Witch Project* does not come out of a vacuum. The 1990's witnessed something of a renaissance in the American horror film. It was Wes Craven who initiated the recent trend with the post-modern *Scream* and *Scream 2* quickly followed by others such as *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and *Urban Legend*. Not since the heyday of American horror in the 70's, has it seemed to appeal so much as genre.

I am, therefore, concerned with locating the phenomenon of *The Blair Witch Project* in a wider frame of generic reference so that it can stimulate further discussion and debate around American horror, analysing the way in which *The Blair Witch Project* conforms to pre-existing discourses of film theory and suggest how, through its departures and transgressions, it may force us to re-think our critical engagement with the genre in the late 1990's and early Twenty First Century.

It was the outspoken Marxist critic Robin Wood who was the first to champion the cause of American horror as a serious subject of critical film theory, arguing that it provided significant sites of transgression from which to effectively analyse the status quo. Wood posited the theory that the monster in the horror genre embodied "all that which a society represses". Working

from a Marxist position "all that which a society represses" related primarily to those features (social, political, sexual, racial) which did not fit into Bourgeoisie capitalist America. He argues that repression is the key to understanding the workings of the modern American state in that, to function, a line must be drawn between what is included in the nation and what is not. According to Wood, the ideological norms of the body politic in the Twentieth Century has been white, heterosexual nuclear families living in small towns, such as Bedford Falls in *It's a Wonderful Life*. The national paradigm, one might say.

Taking a lead from Freud, the key to Wood's argument is the difference he makes between basic and surplus repression:

Basic repression is universal, necessary, and inescapable. It is what makes possible our development from an uncoordinated animal capable of little beyond screaming and convulsions into a human being; it is bound up with the ability to accept the postponement of gratification with the development of our thought and memory process, of our capacity for self-control, and of our recognition and consideration of other people.[iv]

Surplus repression, in contrast, are those constraints imposed upon people by specific cultures since

it is the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within a given culture. (In contemporary America) thus, surplus repression makes us into monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists.[v]

As a cultural critic, Wood sees the media as instrumental in acting as a location from which to facilitate this surplus repression. Wood's list of features that are repressed in American culture forms the basis for his analysis into the horror film genre, where the monster is the embodiment of the repressed. The overarching framework he sets out to characterise this monstrous embodiment is the concept of the "other". "Otherness" represents that which Bourgeoisie ideology cannot recognise or accept but must deal with. In his seminal work, *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes[vi] argues that Bourgeoisie culture can deal with this in two ways: reject it and, by consequence, destroy it or make it safe, understandable and assimilate it into their modes of thinking.[vii]

In later Twentieth Century America, Wood saw as "the other" those aspects of society that had made their voices heard in the 1960's and thus threatened Bourgeoisie America. Amongst this list he includes the Working Classes, Women and alternative political ideologies such as Marxism.

That said, however, Classical Hollywood Narrative is based around problem solving and closure, so the 70's Horror genre was able to let this repressed aspect of culture lose and ensure its containment along with the restoration of the status quo by the final reel of the film. This was possible because

the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilisation represses or oppresses, its re-emergence dramatised, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, and the happy ending - when it exists - typically signifying the restoration of the repression.[viii]

Though some 20 years on from the subject of his enquiry, and the Marxist position challenged, Wood's paradigm is still useful as an insight into studying the phenomenal success of *The Blair Witch Project* and what it articulates about pre-millennial America:

...it (the horror genre) becomes in the 1970's the most important of all American film genre's and perhaps the most progressive, even in its overt nihilism - in a period of extreme cultural crisis and disintegration, which alone offers the possibility of radical change and re-building.[ix]

In *The Blair Witch Project*, it is the dark history of Burkitsville, Maryland, where children went missing in the woods decades earlier that returns to haunt the contemporary age. As I will argue later, however, "the return of the repressed", is not articulated in the classical Hollywood style, since no containment of any kind is suggested at the films end nor any monster ever disclosed to us, thus *The Blair Witch Project*, through its departures and transgressions, offers up the "possibility of radical change and re-building".

All of those engaged in discussion of American horror owe a significant amount of debt to Robin Wood for his groundbreaking study. Yet, at the edge of the millennium, I still feel something is missing from his work. When Wood talked about the characteristics of America he never quite grasped what *"America"* meant to the average man, woman and child out there on Main Street, U.S.A. Films, and particularly *summer* films, operate within a wider social sphere where they are consumed against a specific cultural terrain. So, at the end of the Twentieth Century, what did *America* mean on the beaches of the eastern seaboard in that endless summer?

I believe the crucial omission in Wood's polemic is the idea of the frontier as the defining American experience and that which facilitates National Identity construction and maintenance. Wood impressively trolls through the workings of modern American society, but for a writer so immersed in the cultural ambience of the 70's, his omission of the frontier, as a force in American life, seems surprising. Herein lies the connection between the summer of 75 and 99; the "place" of the frontier has never been properly allocated in American culture. It is at one time both "outside" and "inside" the nation. On the "inside" are the principles of hard work and individualism, whilst on the "outside" is the terrible acts of violence committed against Native American Indians in the name of Manifest Destiny.

This makes me think back to the open road in North Carolina. Just what was it about American culture that had attracted so many throughout the last century? It is more than the simple promise of capitalism, but the way that as a mode of production and social living, capitalism infused with a new, developing nationalist ideology required for a fledgling state. To fully understand how this fusion took place it is necessary to go back to, what I believe to be, American National Identity year zero and the creation of the frontier mythology.

Ever since Frederick Jackson presented his paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"[x] the frontier, capitalism and the politics of representation have had an intimate relationship in American History. What *The Blair Witch Project* successfully managed to do, was to take one of the tenants of American capitalism - the frontier - and give it articulation in a dramatic new form of representation. The complaint that the camera was "shaky", and therefore unwatchable, is indicative of the privileged position representations of the frontier have had in the last Century. As a "location" in history, it has been polished and packaged for us. Before being able to assess the significance of this new mode of representation at the end of the Twentieth Century, it is necessary to understand the importance of frontier ideology in the development and implementation of American National Identity. On this issue, Alan Trachtenberg has noted the following:

An invention of cultural myth, the word *West* embraced an astonishing variety of surfaces and practices, of physiognomic differences and sundry exploitation's they invited. The Western lands provided resources essential as much to Industrial development after the Civil War as to cultural needs of justification, incentive, and disguise. Land and minerals served economic and ideological purposes, the two merging into a single complex image of the West: a temporal site

of the route from past to future, and the spatial site for revitalising national energies. As myth and as economic entity, the West proved indispensable to the formation of a national society and a cultural mission: to fill the vacancy of the Western spaces with civilisation, by means of incorporation (political as well as economic) and violence. Myth and exploitation, incorporation and violence: the process went hand in hand[xi]

The place and time where Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his speech is just as important for understanding its influence on American National Identity as what was said. At an 1893 meeting of the American Historical Association during the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Turner presented a historical interpretation of American development that served both political and cultural needs. By arguing for a narrative of unity and wholeness, Turner was presenting a blueprint for functional American nationalism were immigrant groupings could pledge allegiance to a nationalist ideology which was divorced from ethnic or racial specificity.

In his thesis the term "West" came to mean ruggedness, independence and free of social constraint, since

that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes from freedom.[xii]

The minute Turner stepped of the podium in Chicago, the concept of the West entered into American national consciousness in a contradictory state that has prevailed to the present day.

In effect, he was championing the cause of a frontier that had already been closed, arguing that even if the frontier itself no longer physically existed, the legacy of it lives on in the character and consciounse of the American people. The world that Turner spoke from was not one of small agrarian farmers living from the land, but it was the glass and steel of industrial urban capitalism where corporations dictated the forms of business and social activities. Nowhere was this more in evidence than the city of Chicago itself:

at last the slender paths of aboriginal intercourse have been broadened and interwoven into the complex mazes of modern commercial lines; the wilderness has been interpenetrated by lines of civilisation growing ever more numerous. It is like the steady growth of a nervous system for the originally simple, inert continent.[xiii]

At a time when it was facing forward, the American nation felt that it had to look back. This is a paradigm which holds true for 1999 and 1975, as much as 1893. Before it felt it could deal with the trauma of the recent past and face the 80's with confidence, 70's America looked back to the frontier and the "early settlers" of Amity Island, where a satisfactory answer was given. In 1999, at a crucial moment in its culture, 90's America looked to the Maryland woods, but no simple answer was given.[xiv]

As a historical discourse, Turner's polemics instigated a kind of nationalist canonisation of the past where those historical figures imbued with taming the frontier were given hero status. Yet, what of the "other" in American society from this time period? What of those who do not figure in the discourses of Turner, who are not part of this canonisation - what becomes of them? It was the first example of the kind of surplus repression that Wood identified and was inextricably linked to the place of the frontier in modern America; those excluded from the frontier would join Robin Wood's list of repressed features and assume the position of "other" in American life.

It should be noted that in the 1970's valiant efforts were made to attempt to challenge this restrictive canon of America's frontier past. If the 70's horror genre gave repressed aspects of American culture something of a discursive space from which to articulate themselves, the same is true of a group of scholars known as "New Western Historians".

Parallels exist between film and historiography in the following way: Just as classical narrative ensured the containment of the transgression ("the return of the repressed") and maintenance of the status quo in American horror, the shift to the right and death of the counter culture ensured that new western history found it hard to break into mainstream political thought thus Turner's frontier discourse accompanied America in the transition from the 70's to the 80's. A re-conception of frontier history and its ideological consequence found few favours in Reaganite America. Yet, like the horror genre, it would signal the start of a much larger independent movement within historiography that would broaden its sphere of influence with the on-set of post modernity and the approaching millennium, as I will demonstrate later

Richard Slotkin[xv] is one historian who came to prominence in the Conservative 1980's analysing how the myths of the West has been used within American culture and a consideration of his work is important in understanding the "place" of the West at the end of the Twentieth Century. Following on from this, Brian W. Dippie makes the case for the study of western mythology as crucial in a historical understanding of the West:

Since cultural values shift over time, myths, in order to remain relevant, shift their meaning aswell. If, as most would agree, the major challenge facing western history is to relate past to present in a meaningful way, the mythic approach has much to offer. It accounts for continuity and change. Custer is dead, his last stand long over. Why, then, do people continue to re-fight it?... We may dismiss Custer as a minor figure historically. But he was once a national hero... His defenders still think of him as a paragon if not a Saint, and has been compared to Jesus who died in that hill. His detractors regard him as a racist villain, fit symbol for America's mistreatment of its native people: "Custer died for your sins...." In either guise, hero or villain, Custer continues to function as a vital presence in the public's imagination. Why?[xvi]

Why? Because the frontier is a nationally defining experience - the historical basis of American National Identity. The paradox, at the end of the American Century, is that it is something of a schizophrenic identity, one that is both "inside" and "outside" popular conceptions of the nation.

If, as Frederic Jameson[xvii] has argued, "History is what Hurts", *The Blair Witch Project* can be approached as a self-reflexive tale of investigating the history of frontier, and what repressed features might live there. It carries a significant metaphor for the larger explorations of American history in the contemporary age and its radicalism lies in its presentation of history in a new aesthetic form. It also locates itself as a history documentary in terrain already covered by the likes of David Lynch (*Blue Velvet, Twin Peaks*) that dealt with repression of a different kind in small American towns.

Throughout the film, the viewer is presented with various examples of historical discourse (myth, historical fact, personal belief) and the mechanics of how these collectively fit together to tell the history of an event are foregrounded. Firstly, there is the character of Mary Brown. Her characterisation is crucial, in that she fulfils the stereotypical crazy old woman indicative of the genre. Yet, as Donahue informs us, she is also a historian writing a book on American history from her trailer park home complete with American flag.

There are also the various interviews conducted in Burkitsville itself, where people are asked what they know of the legend of the Blair Witch. In the short interviews, one woman tells how she never goes up into the woods. Donahue subsequently responds by stating "Does that mean

you believe in the legend of the Blair Witch" to which the woman says "I believe enough not to go up there...".

This statement serves as a useful paradigm for understanding frontier history at the end of the Twentieth Century. This statement would work equally well if it read as follows: "I believe enough not to challenge history...". The achievement of 70's horror, and the debt that *The Blair Witch Project* owes it, is that it provided a discursive site from which to challenge the status quo, challenge the canonisation of the nation and the "believing enough" theory. At the end of the Twentieth Century, what is now coming back as the "repressed" is not alternative political ideologies or the threat of Woman's rights, but history itself.

If history, and *conceptions* of national history, are afforded a privileged place in the world of academia, society will, in general, believe enough not to look behind or beyond the picture of the national past presented to them. Often these kinds of polemics are heard by those campaigning for social activism (forcing governments to act upon issues of civil rights or, in the case of South Africa, the truth and reconciliation committees) but, I would suggest, that before being able to understand contemporary America there is a desperate need to fully understand the national past, of which the frontier is an integral part.

To develop this line of critical engagement further and begin to think about how *The Blair Witch Project* can be seen as representing a new form of historical investigation, I need to sketch out the main parameters of a new approach that has been loosely termed Post-Modern historiography.

Along with the wider dissemination of domestic recording equipment, has come the ability for people to create their own little moments of history. In America, when Rodney King or JFK is discussed, it is the footage shot by Zappruder or Holliday, which is shown. In a very real sense, history lives and breathes around about us in the contemporary age, as John Gillis observes:

Never before has so much been recorded, collected; and never before has remembering been so compulsive, even as rote memorisation ceases to be central in the educational process. What we can no longer keep in our heads we keep in storage.[xviii]

Post-Modern historiography argues for the abdication of a straight causal narrative that can encompass the totality of a given historical event. This means that such grand narratives as Turner's are at odds with the wider cultural paradigms that views the past as open to many different interpretation since

today, more people than ever before are "willing" things. In the wake of those absent centres and collapsed meta-narratives, so the conditions of post-modernism have produced that multiplicity of histories that can be met everywhere throughout our democratic and consumer culture.[xix]

What was found in the tapes recorded by the three students who went missing in Burkitsville, Maryland was a classic example of post-modern history where the video-taped evidence was complete with gaps and fissures. It conforms to Hayden White's theory on post-modern historiography which is "..discontinuity, disruption and chaos are our lot"[xx]. The film is a historical discourse on two events - the Blair Witch legend and the search for missing students both on going at the same time[xxi]. Indeed, it reaches the stage where the two histories are intertwined, since the more the students get lost, the more we seem to be finding out about the Blair Witch legend, until, that is, the climatic sequence where both "histories" have reached a point of hysteria. This aligns very much with what Roland Barthes has argued about the "place" of history in the contemporary age, where our relationship to the past is firstly based on an active engagement with modes of representation:

With regard to many of these photographs, it was History which separated me from them. Is History not simply that time when we were not born?... History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it - and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it...[xxii]

This widening of the sphere of history, as identified by the likes of Hayden White, forms the basis for a number of other films in the 90's horror genre. Of most importance on this theme, is the two films, *I Know what you did Last Summer* and the aptly titled, *I Still Know what you did Last Summer* along with *Urban Legend*. All of these work through central young adult characters investigating hidden aspects of history in their local areas. Investigation is as much a part of this new horror as the standard thrills and spills. Indeed, even the title of *I Know What You Did Last Summer* hints at a metaphor for the larger repressed aspects of US frontier history; to produce a sequel called, *I Still Know* suggests that the process of bringing to light all that is repressed in a society's past may still have some way to go.

The issue of representations of history on film is something that has come to the surface in 90's Hollywood, particularly since many Academy Awards went to epics such as *Braveheart*, *Titanic* and *Forrest Gump*. Yet, curiously, the resurgence of the horror genre is noticeably absent from the theoretical discussions led by people such as Robert Rosenstone[xxiii]. It has been well documented that history can fuse with other genres creating hybridisation, but I would argue it is time that critical film theory began to look at the mechanism of history and horror working together in the light of the success of *The Blair Witch Project*, and taking on the good work done by Robin Wood in the 1970's.

Indeed, I would go further, and argue that the fusion of these two genres articulates something deeper about American youth at the end of the Twentieth Century and its relationship to the dominant cultural norms. By simply raising the question of *why* the horror genre should appeal in two particular decades to a predominantly younger age group, the answers can be illuminating and provide pointers for further discussion and debate in the spheres of both film study and cultural theory more generally.

Again, thinking back to the summer of '75, the generation who consumed the horror genre in the 70's were those off-springs of the counter cultural movements of the 1960's when Wood's repressed groupings took to the streets of the nation. When this movement broke down, or, as Peter Fonda says in the swan-song of counter-cultural cinema, "we blew it" (*Easy Rider*), it fled to suburban America to pursue a life full of golf, shopping malls and air-conditioned cars. The youth who came to prominence in this environment had no battles to fight and no cause to champion; theirs, unlike the generation before them, became a materialistic life. 70's horror was popular because it challenged that by providing danger and chaos in suburban America - outside every window, in every street, there could be another Michael Myers.

Christopher Lasch has described this mood in 70's America as "The Culture of Narcissism"[xxiv] where he claims that the discourse of political action shifted from society to the self:

After the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing and jogging.....[xxv]

Lasch further argues that this was a dangerous trend which led to apathy on the part of the American public since:

Harmless in themselves, these pursuits, elevated to a program and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity and awareness, signify a retreat from politics and a repudiation of the recent past.

Indeed, Americans seem to forget not only the sixties, the riots, the new left, Vietnam, Watergate, but their entire collective past... To live for the moment is the prevailing passion - to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a successions of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future.[xxvi]

Foremost in this forgetting of the past, is the dark side of the frontier. To those living in 70's air-conditioned suburban America, they would probably have agreed with Donahue. Nobody could get lost in 70's America, yet horror jolted people out of their comfortable lives and terrorised them running around their safe little suburban streets. And with every jolt, came a wider metaphor about frontier ideology and its place in American national culture. Whenever a Travis Bickle or a Michael Myers threatened the audience it was a threat from the frontier. The monsters which America once needed to tame the frontier, to commit those unspeakable acts, have no place to go when the frontier closed. For men who carry the violent impulses in them - part of the "national character" as Turner proclaimed in 1893 - had no place in the self-healing 70's America. Vietnam had been the new frontier for a generation, where young men were sent to fulfil America's Manifest Destiny, yet when they returned they found a society, just as Lasch described it, where these feelings were given no space nor any respect.[xxvii]

The generations who flocked to see *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999 did so for the same reasons that drove the 70's audience of the beach and into the movie theatres. Nowadays, we live in the age where everything is visible, all the time. Through the explosion of the Internet and other forms of communication, one can scour the world without having to leave the comfort (and safety) of one's own home. Television has moved towards the voyeuristic, fly on the wall docu-dramas, epitomised with the worldwide success of the *Big Brother* format.

In such a frenzy of the visual, it is hugely significant that *The Blair Witch Project* was successful precisely because it did *not* show. Perhaps by summer '99 people felt they had seen it all in the movie theatre and the only place they could really be scared was somewhere in the back of their own mind. To this end, the film used the devices more akin to the fields of literature where the reader uses their imagination to engage with the text.

The success of the film thus may be the starting point for a wider discussion about capitalism at the start of the Twenty First Century and its connection to modes of representation. I would suggest that in order to broaden *The Blair Witch Project* out to the larger social, political and cultural context of contemporary America, the film should be read alongside the writings of Naomi Klein, author of "No Logo"[xxviii].

Her polemics are based on the theory that the global capitalist organisations have colonised the world's resources to such an extent that they are the new purveyors of slavery on an unprecedented global scale. To quote just one statistic among many: an Indonesian worker may produce a pair of sneakers for $2 a day wage but when transported to Nike town in the United States, it will sell for up to $120. The scenes of Anti corporate activism witnessed recently have happened, believes Klein, since branding has worked so well in the Twentieth Century:

Multi-nationals such as Nike, Microsoft, and Starbucks have sought to become the chief communicators of all that is good and cherished in our culture: art, sport, community, connection, and equality. But the more successful this project is, the more vulnerable these companies become. When they do wrong, their crimes are not simply dismissed as the misdemeanours of another corporation trying to make a buck. This is a connection more akin to the relationship of fan and celebrity: emotionally intense, but shallow enough to turn on a dime. [xxix]

She also resents the colonisation of the globe, where third world countries are packaged for us and delivered to us in Starbucks coffee houses. Klein cites this as the front line of anti-corporate activism:

...it's about saying that we actually want the real thing, the real "third place" (not home, not work) that Starbucks tries to sell us, the real public space. People are now saying - I do want real community, this is a strong and powerful idea and I resent the fact that the idea has been stolen from me.[xxx]

In a statement echoing Donahue claim about being lost in America, Klein also feels that in the modern world, "there is no open space anymore" where the corporations have not been, where the culture has been colonised and plastered on a mug. Her rallying call is for people to re-discover themselves as citizens, and not just consumers; it is a call which could equally be aimed at post-modern historians seeking to re-claim the past, as a broad and open discursive field

The same might be said of American cinema in 1999. Prior to three student filmmakers going missing, it seemed as though everything that was to be seen, had been seen. Naomi Klein is helping to re-define politics for a new generation and is doing so by foregrounding the mechanics of global capitalism. She is attempting to allow those repressed features of capitalism - the slaves who work away behind the scenes, far away from the sharp camera focus on Tiger Wood's new outfit - a voice, much in the same way as Wood characterised 70's horror genre as doing. It is about creating a discursive space within contemporary society to allow those repressed voices a platform, both from the present and the past.

Like the Frontier, like Vietnam and like Watergate, America might not like what it sees when it goes behind the vale of global capitalism. Just as the frontier, when investigated beyond Turner, gave up dark and hidden secrets, what tales of horror will this current political movement bring to light? And what sense of being "lost" in their own country will it bring to Americans today?

In terms of generic hybridisation, the fusion of the horror and historical investigation genre, may be the starting point for a new generation investigating aspects of the national past, which is profitable at the box office and accessible to the wider popular culture. The character of Mary Brown is an excellent starting point for this new area of study, where historical discourse fuses with Horror generic characteristics. She is also indicative of post-modern historiography, since she lives in a trailer park yet claims to be a historian writing a book on American history.

This new genre can offer up the possibility of radical restructuring since, in Wood's polemic, the containment of the monster was essential to the ideological workings of the film, where the status quo would be restored. Yet, *The Blair Witch Project* suggests that whatever repressed aspect of Burkitsville, Maryland, which haunts the woods in the later 90's, is beyond containment and beyond visibility. Crucially, this forces the viewer to construct the monster in their own mind; what is that they fear may be lurking beneath the veneer of pre-millennial America? This process of construction was most evident when people asked "what do *you* think the *Blair Witch* was?".

It sub-consciously an ideologically weighted question, for the answer depended on what aspects of America scared you the most. If, in contrast, a special effect ghost had been shown in that house, the Woman's assertion that "..I believes enough not to go up there" would have been vindicated. As it stands, however, the monster was different for every viewer. In your own mind you to had imagine what was going on beyond the corners in that fateful house. In this very process lies the burden of history, since "the screams of a summer night"[xxxi] in pre-millennial America came from a black screen and some noise in the bushes. What was it about the burden of American exceptionalism that drove people to the movie theatres and be scared by a black screen? An answer to this question seems fundamental for the field of film studies and,

for that matter, cultural theory, to begin to ascertain a critical approach to the success of this film and what it said about America at the edge of the Twenty First Century.

In 1975, America was scared by flesh and blood. Bruce was there for all to see, and everywhere in the water he could bite you, if you were not careful. For the Labour Day weekenders of '75, simulated Jaws attacks were a standard joke. They had fun that weekend, hiding in the closets and shark cages away from America's monsters, since, in the end, the monsters were always destroyed. Everyone could return to air-conditioned suburban America safe in the knowledge that the monsters could never *really* get you, as long as the good old classical narrative held sway.

At the end of *The Blair Witch Project* Josh, Heather and Michael had been unable to neither assimilate nor destroy the "other". Not that anyone could agree what the "other" was in the first place. Just as in 1893 and 1975, it seemed as though one more look at the frontier was required before America could face the brave new world of the Twenty First Century. This time, however, straight answers to difficult questions have been hard to find and I hope the observations made here help to provoke study into this area.

After all these years on from *Jaws*, what jokes do this generation have to share on their autumn camps in the woods? No monster to fear, just a sound that, even in itself, is hard to imitate. If someone says "..watch the Blair Witch doesn't get you", a metaphor for America's past is being articulated.

Reflecting upon that open road in North Carolina, having just seen *The Blair Witch Project,* I can now see how wrong I had been. There was *another* America, one rooted in the past as much as the present and the future; where it is still possible to get "lost" in and where repressed aspects of a nations past remain hidden. The road to this place, however is often difficult to find because people “believe enough not go up there.." for they might not like what they find.

As a generation, it is necessary to move beyond this, to confront what has been left out of the worldview of America at the turn of the century, whether it be Vietnam, The Frontier or Global Capitalism. To see that America, and the world, has places still to get “lost” in which we will only see when we look beyond what is provided by the culture at large. This process must start by confronting demons which may exist "..if you go down to the woods today.....".

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[i]Thompson, David Overexposures: The crisis in American Film Making (William Morrow & Company, New York, 1981) p.27

[ii]Bell, Daniel "The End of American Exceptionalism" *in* The Winding Passage: Essays and Sociological Journeys 1960 - 1980 (Basic Books, New York, 1980)

[iii]For an analysis of the way which in the iconograhhy of Amity Island engaged with the imagery of early American settlers, *see* Heath, Stephen "Jaws, Ideology and Film Theory" *in* Nichols, Bill (ed) Movies and Methods II (University of California Press, London, 1985) pp. 509 - 514

[iv]Wood, Robin "The American Nightamre: Horror in the 70's" *in* Wood, Robin Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan (Columbia University Press, New York, 1986) p. 70

[v]Ibid, p. 71

[vi]Barthes, Roland Mythologies (Paladin, London, 1973)

[vii]For a paradigmatic example of Hollywood's construction of the "other", see the opening scene in the Vietnam section of Stanley Kubrik's *Full Metal Jacket*, where the Vietnmese prostitute and the surrounding mise-en-scene is appropriated into western discourse.

[viii]Wood, "The American Nightmare" *in* Wood, Hollywood: From Vietnam to Reagan p. 75

[ix]Ibid, p. 80

[x]Turner, Frederick Jackson The Turner thesis concerning the role of the Frontier in American History (D.C. Heath, Lexington, 1972)

[xi]Trachtenburg, Alan The Incorporation of America (Hill and Wang, New York, 1984) p.17

[xii]Turner, The Turner thesis p. 45

[xiii]Trachtenburg, The Incorporation of America p.19

[xiv]To see how Hollywood has worked through this American paradox in relation to a number of other genres, *see* Ray, Robert A Certain Tendencey of the Hollywood Cinema 1930 - 1980 (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1980)

[xv]Slotkin, Richard The Fatal Enviroment: The Myth of the Frontier in the age of Industrialisation 1800 - 1890 (Harper Perenial, New York, 1994) Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier (Weslayan University Press, Connecticut, 1973) Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in American History (Maxwell MacMillan International, New York, 1992)

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[xvii]Jameson, Frederic Postmodernism *or* The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Verso, London, 1991)

[xviii]Gillis, John (ed) Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1984) p.14

[xix]White, Hayden The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (John Hopkins University Press, London, 1987)

[xx]Ibid, p.8

[xxi]Special mention should also be made of the films climatic sequence in the abandoned house. It is shot in double take on two different film stocks, thus creating further narrative displacement.

[xxii]Barthes, Roland Mythologies p.76

[xxiii]Rosenstone, Robert Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Ideas of History (Harvard University Press, Boston, 1995) , Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1995)

[xxiv]Lasch, Christopher The Culture of Narcissism (Norton, New York, 1978)

[xxv]Ibid, p.4

[xxvi]Ibid, p. 5

[xxvii]This led to the creation of a number of films dealing with the subject of the returning Vietnam Veteran, of which *Taxi Driver* is paradigmatic.

[xxviii]Klein, Naomi No Logo (Harper Collins, New York, 2000)

[xxix]Interview given to *The Guardian* newspaper (23/9/00) pp. 12 - 21

[xxx]Ibid, p. 21

[xxxi]This phrase is taken from an article by Tom Figenshu "Screams of a Summer Night" Film Comment (Volume 15, Number 5, September - October 1979) pp. 49 - 53