Sacred Heart UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University
DigitalCommons@SHU

School of Communication and Media Arts Faculty Publications

Communication and Media Arts (SCMA)

2004

The Political Economy of the Indie Blockbuster: Fandom, Intermediality, and The Blair Witch Project

James Castonguay
Sacred Heart University, castonguayj@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/media_fac

Part of the American Film Studies Commons, and the Film and Media Studies Commons

The Political Economy of the Indie Blockbuster

Fandom, Intermediality, and *The Blair Witch Project*

James Castonguay

Within the context of the postmodern excesses of fin de siècle media culture, the 1999 film *The Blair Witch Project* stood out, due in large part to the sheer scale and intensity of its media presence. Indeed, the cultural production of what J. P. Telotte calls "*The Blair Witch Project* Project" (see his essay, reprinted in this volume) provides media scholars and cultural critics with a rich case study for addressing important theoretical issues within the field of film and media studies—for example, authorship, realism, intermediality,[1] genre, art vs. commerce (or high vs. low culture), independent vs. mainstream Hollywood film—while also presenting new theoretical and methodological challenges for media scholarship in the twenty-first century.

While I will address several of the aforementioned issues in this essay, my primary focus is on what could broadly be described as *BWP*'s political economy. Examining the political economy of cinema includes a consideration of an individual film's relationship to patterns of ownership and the economic structures of film production, distribution, and exhibition. As Joanne Hollows has argued, "A political economy of cinema is . . . necessary if we are to understand why and how certain types of films get produced and distributed; the industrial processes and practices that structure the form and content of these film texts; and how audiences select and interpret them" (33). After a brief contextualization of *The Blair Witch Project* within the broader trends of 1990s media

culture, I analyze the production, distribution, and marketing of the film within the structure of the entertainment industry and in the context of its critical and popular reception. I conclude this section by arguing that the popular reception of the film and discourse among fan communities reflect standard Hollywood models of cinematic consumption rather than resistant practices. The second half of the essay begins by historicizing *BWP* in relation to film production and exhibition in the 1890s, before concluding with an examination of its mythic status as an independent film that threatened to undermine Hollywood's blockbuster paradigm. Building on the argument presented in the first half of the essay, I conclude that the political economy of *BWP* creates a false impression of the film as counter-hegemonic. By placing *BWP* in these broader historical, cultural, and institutional contexts, my examination of the film's political economy increases our "understanding [of] the power relations involved in . . . [the] production and consumption" of *BWP,* while also "contribut[ing] towards a more historical analysis" of this individual film and contemporary cinema in general (Hollows 33).

Reality Sells

John Fiske reminds us that "realism is not a matter of any fidelity to an empirical reality, but of the discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed" (21). I would argue, following Fiske, that one of the most important contexts for understanding the meanings, influence, and political economy of *The Blair Witch Project* is the ubiquitous "sense of reality" being constructed, marketed, and commodified by late-1990s "reality TV" through programs like *Survivor, 1900, Cops, Real World, Big Brother, Real TV, Road Rules, Making the Band, Temptation Island, The Mole,* and *American High.* What differentiates *BWP* from these other texts, however, is the degree to which the film and its makers were able to exploit, fetishize, and commodify the fiction of reality in such remarkable ways.

Whereas "reality TV" programs like *The Real World* and *Survivor* introduce the codes of fictional narrative realism into their primarily documentary form, *BWP* incorporates conventions associated with the genre of documentary into its primarily fictional form, including a long tradition of cinema (and video) verité techniques, the "objective" interactive interview, and a home camcorder aesthetic. For *Forbes*'s Marc Lacter, *BWP* became

the privileged text for the larger trend in the *re*-presentation of reality, and he used the pejorative phrase "Blair Witch TV" to describe the latest spate of reality-based programming. The article's subtitle sums up the author's objections to this trend: "Fighting a Losing Battle against Cable, Network Television Is Destined to Get Even Trashier Than It Already Is" (Lacter).

These and other criticisms from liberal and conservative sources—especially the equation of "trash" with low-budget production values, a video aesthetic of televisual realism, a perceived sense of heightened voyeurism, and the lowest common denominator of ratings and profit—recapitulate older criticisms of mass media exemplified by U.S. intellectual Dwight Macdonald (1962) and the writings of the Frankfurt School critics (Horkheimer and Adorno). At the core of these criticisms was an assumption that the putative realism inherent in film technology exploited a mass audience of passive consumers unable to distinguish between movies and real life or to interpret texts critically.

Ella Taylor offered an updated version of these critiques when she wrote in *The Nation* that *BWP* was "created by a bunch of young cyberfreaks" who "juggle . . . the hyperrealism of an ersatz documentary with eerie intimations of paranormality" aimed at "digitally literate . . . little boys." For another critic, the film was "more hype than movie," demonstrating "that success can be achieved despite . . . [or] because of extreme amateurishness" (Cunneen). Finally, like these other examples of the critical infantilization of the film and its audience, film studies professor Peter Brunette's objections were also directed in part at the film's supposedly juvenile aesthetic:

> Visually and aurally, it's an awful film, and it looks like something that was shot by an eight-year-old for Scariest Home Videos; that, of course, is part of the idea, but it doesn't make the film any more pleasurable to watch. . . . If this film makes money—and I'm sure it will—it will be one more item in the long litany that proves that success can be bought and that critics are so desperate for something different that they'll root for anything even slightly offbeat.

These criticisms of *BWP* (equating the film with "trash" TV and the infantilization and marginalization of its audience) are interesting in light of earlier critical responses. For instance, before *BWP*'s wide mainstream release, *Newsweek* argued that the "elegantly scary" (Giles 62) film would be most appealing to "art house buffs" (Giles and Hamilton), and another critic

described the film as being "remarkably well-crafted—even art-ful—on its own low-budget terms" (Covert). It was declared an instant "arthouse legend" (Savlov) after playing to "raves" and sold-out shows at the 1999 Sundance and Cannes Film Festivals, where *BWP* was the only American film to win a prize (the Prix de La Jeunesse for the most promising young filmmakers [Tatara; Ebert]). An article in the *Toronto Star* about the intellectual excitement created by *BWP* at Cannes even compared Sanchez and Myrick's film to the legendary avant-garde cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, noting that "hand-held cameras were de rigeur for the famed [French] New Wave directors of the 50s and 60s" ("$25,000 Movie" 1).

These different critical responses remind us that the aes-thetic and political value assigned to formal techniques (like handheld camera movement) depends on the context of produc-tion and reception. At the same time, they chart *BWP*'s cultural trajectory down the aesthetic hierarchy from art-house cinema to successful indie blockbuster (or from legitimate art to lowly com-merce). These critical reactions thus comprise an integral part of the film's political economy, pointing to the ways in which *BWP* became a site of critical and cultural contestation concerning, among other things, the aesthetic hierarchies, generic boundaries, and dominant methods of film production and distribution in the 1990s.

Fan Communities and the Popular Reception of *The Blair Witch Project*

As I noted above, early critiques of mass culture tended to view mass media (or the "culture industries") as ideologically homoge-neous, thus positing a monolithic audience of passive cultural dupes unable to resist or subvert the ideology of media messages (Macdonald; Horkheimer and Adorno). In addition, Douglas Kellner notes, "the Frankfurt School model of a monolithic mass culture contrasted with an ideal of 'authentic art,' which limits critical, subversive, and emancipatory moments to certain privi-leged artifacts of high culture." In contrast to this approach, Kellner advises that "one should see critical and ideological moments in the full range of culture, and not limit critical moments to high culture and identify all of low culture as ideo-logical." Since the 1970s, cultural studies scholars have done what Kellner suggests by exploring the ways in which audiences and fan

communities interpret, negotiate, subvert, resist, and "poach" mass cultural texts in myriad ways, often putting them to creative and at times oppositional cultural uses (Hall; Fiske; Jenkins).

The discursive continuum that comprises the *BWP* text or project includes a variety of interpretive communities. For example, in addition to official *Blair Witch Project* Web sites are unofficial Web sites and fan pages such as *"The Blair Witch Project* Forum," "The Blair Witch Projects," "The Burkittsville Photo Gallery," and "The Essential Guide to *The Blair Witch Project."* Some of these fan Web sites elaborate the mythology of the original film and offer original narratives that expand *BWP* text (e.g., "Blair Witch TV"; "The Real Aftermath"; "The Witch Files").

BWP parodies became a subgenre in their own right, from videos on the Web, VHS releases, and film shorts to promotional parodies for programming on ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, and ESPN. MTV's Video Music Awards offered a parody of *BWP* parodies in which Chris Rock and Janeane Garofalo are unable to shoot their own *Blair Witch* parody because they keep stumbling upon other crews in the woods trying to do the same. The Web's multimedia capabilities and global reach also facilitated the distribution of hundreds of *BWP* video parodies, some of which were released on VHS and DVD by TriMark Pictures as *The Bogus Witch Project* (2000) (see also the Web site parodies "The Blair Warner Project," "The Wicked Witch Project," and "The Blair Witch Ate My Balls").

In addition to these parodies, several of the film's detractors launched an anti–*Blair Witch Project* Web ring that included "The un-Official Anti–*Blair Witch Project*" and "The Anti–*Blair Witch Project* Page," while a group of citizens from Burkittsville, Maryland, created a Web site "to explain to the world that Burkittsville was being harmed by a fictional movie set in [their] town" ("The 'Witches' of Burkittsville"). Official ancillary texts include the *Curse of the Blair Witch* video, *BWP* video game series, *The Blair Witch Project: A Dossier,* the DVD and VHS releases of *BWP,* and other licensed merchandise such as stickmen, comic books, dog tags, clothing, posters, key chains, incense burners, shot glasses, bottle openers, glass ashtrays, stickers, and biker wallets ("Artisan Entertainment Scares Up Major Licensing").

Discussions about the film on Web boards, Usenet newsgroups, and in on-line chat rooms comprise another important component of *BWP*'s mediation. Deliberations about the authenticity of *BWP* dominated many of these on-line discussions. The following excerpts from the Sci Fi Channel's message board are

representative of debates concerning the film's generic status as fiction or documentary:

> Date: 7/13/99
> From: sumi27
> I did a little research when I first saw the commercials for the show on Sci-fi and discovered that the movie is pure fiction designed to look like a documentary. The three students and the people inter- viewed are actors, the history of the witch is all fabricated, and the website is setup to give the movie a more realistic atmosphere. ... . Sorry to burst your bubble, I was hoping it was real too.

> Date: 7/13/99
> From: Cmurder
> For all of you people who only got to see the TV show [*Curse of the Blair Witch*], I can tell you that I live about 20 minutes form Burkitsville [*sic*], MD and I attended Montgomery College (the school that the three amatuer [*sic*] film makers attended). The story is not fiction. No one says much about it but everyone seems to know that something erie [*sic*] and godless is happening in those woods in Frederick County. You cannot determine whether the story is fiction simply by hitting a few keys on your stupid com- puter!!! E-mail me.

> Date: 8/9/99
> From: hanlecter
> I am very undecided about the Blair Witch Project. I think people are making very good points from both sides of the story as to whether it is true or not. The one thing that I have questions about is how often do you see three no name actors act so good. The fear that they had was so real. It is just hard for me to believe that someone could act that good. I just saw the BWP last night and it really scared me. But if it is true I am going more along the line that some human freak was out there not a witch. The other thing is if I was hunted in the woods by something or someone I would have ditched those cam- eras from the beginning and ran for my life. Like at the end when they went into the bacement [*sic*] I would have wanted to be free to look to my left and right and behind me at all times. (ha ha) Hanlecter[2]

Although some viewers were duped into believing that the film was an actual documentary, these posts and thousands like them provide evidence for the existence of active and creative spectators rather than passive, uncritical consumers. For instance, "Cmurder" participates in the film's blurring of boundaries between the fictional and actual by mimicking the rhetorical strategies of the film and its creators, thus providing further "evi-

dence" of the film's authenticity and contributing in his or her own way to the legend of the Blair Witch.

BWP's intertextuality, generic mix of science fiction and horror, and Web-savvy young audience all lend themselves to Timothy Corrigan's model of cultish film-viewing practices. "Instead of reading movies," Corrigan argues, "contemporary audiences now adopt movies, create cults around them, tour through them. . . . Contemporary audience's viewing conditions . . . have less to do with any strictly textual features of those movies than with *how these movies are historically acted on from outside their textual peripheries*" (81). Written several years before the release of *BWP*, Corrigan's claim that these "cultish [viewing] formations" (81) have become the dominant model of spectatorship is relevant for my purposes. Indeed, although many articles in popular and trade journals referred explicitly to the "Blair Witch cult," the film's appearance on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* suggests that the film and its audience were far from marginalized, even if the Blair Witch phenomenon was presented in part as an eccentric cultural spectacle for the benefit of older readers of these mainstream magazines (including parents). (Of course, just as the veracity of *BWP* was the topic of passionate on-line debate, many of the film's enthusiastic followers were self-reflective about their cultish fanaticism.)

In response to the hype surrounding the film and its increasing popularity, *Salon*'s Patrizia DiLucchio questioned the authenticity of *BWP*'s cult following by baldly asking if *BWP* had faked its on-line fan base, suggesting that "Glowing reviews and fan sites raise suspicions that Hollywood is planting ready-made buzz on the Net." Referring to the over twenty fan sites, e-mail lists, Web rings, Usenet discussion groups, and positive reviews that appeared *before* the film's wide theatrical release, the article quotes "industry executives" as saying that *BWP*'s producers enlisted their friends to construct Web sites as part of an "organized effort . . . that tricked the press" through "similarly suspicious language" (DiLucchio). *Salon* later published letters to the editor objecting to DiLucchio's article, including the following comments from Jeff Johnson, who claims "the distinction of being the very first person [to] put up a fan site [*"The Blair Witch Project* Forum"] dedicated to *The Blair Witch Project* in December 1998":

> Is this article aimed at discrediting the filmmakers . . . because larger studios are jealous of the attention this tiny film has gotten? How did we know about it so far in advance? The Independent Film

Channel ran pieces about three missing students who disappeared
making a documentary over a year ago. People looking for infor-
mation on the subject found only one source: the Haxan Films Web
site. That is where we started the community, where the buzz
began. . . . Directors Ed Sanchez and Dan Myrick have been very
accessible to all of us; that made us want to spread the word about
the film. . . . Everything I have done has been for the love of [*The
Blair Witch Project*], as a film fan. Haxan Films didn't offer me a
cushy job or pay me for my services.

The *Salon* article also singled out A&e's "*The Blair Witch
Project* Fanatic's Guide" (constructed by Abigail Marceluk [i.e.,
"A"] and Eric Alan Ivins [i.e., "e"]) due to its professional rather
than personal Web production values (including links to *Blair
Witch Project* merchandise) and because the site's creators
appeared on a Sci Fi Channel special about the film. Marceluk's
father also wrote to *Salon* in protest, insisting that his daughter
"is not a fake or a charlatan" but "a cum laude graduate of Yale,
with honors in Film Study and a graduate student in Film and
Media Arts at Temple University" who "was investigating
witches for a Masters thesis film project when she happened upon
the Blair Witch" (Marceluk). On the one hand, Johnson's and
Marceluk's comments are an admirable defense of *BWP* and the
authenticity of its fans. On the other hand, they suggest that the
BWP fan-community is composed of very willing consumers,
eager to take on the major studios by showing that an indepen-
dent film can be just as popular and profitable as a traditional big-
budget blockbuster.

Instead of viewing these uses of the Web by *Blair Witch* fans
as examples of progressive interactivity, I see them instead as
forms of inter-*passivity* in which Internet users actively embrace
the pleasures of consumerism and celebrate the profit-driven prac-
tices of Hollywood film production and distribution. And while
the intertextuality and popular reception of *BWP* are important
to the film's meanings, these fan discourses provide evidence that
Blair Witch spectators are subservient to Hollywood's practices
rather than resistant to its logic of market capitalism.

Intermediality, the Blockbuster Paradigm,
and the Myth of Independent Cinema

The ubiquitous presence of the cultural production of *The Blair
Witch Project* has prompted James R. Keller (see his essay in this

volume) to suggest that *BWP* "may be one of the film industry's first truly intertextual productions." Although Keller argues that "the 'mockumentary' that appeared on the Sci Fi Channel is arguably the primary text," he also describes the "confusion of primary and secondary sources and the destabilizing of the boundaries between traditional textual categories," which for him are "a particularly postmodern feature of the Blair Witch phenomenon." In order to better understand *BWP*'s political economy, however, I would argue that it becomes necessary to shift our concern from intertextuality to intermediality. I prefer the term and method of intermediality to intertextuality because text-based studies tend to ignore the structure and role of the media industry in the meaning-making process. A focus on intermediality is also better suited to an analysis of the political economy of film because it lends itself to a consideration of patterns of media concentration and ownership. At the same time, the concept also allows us to historicize the production and reception of *BWP* within the context of what is different about or specific to newer media.

Scholars of early cinema developed the term "intermediality" to refer to the inextricable connection among vaudeville, print media, and the medium of film in the 1890s when vaudeville theaters provided early film producers with an existing format through which they could exhibit their films (Allen). In addition, the conditions of reception and exhibition for the earliest film viewers provided a multimedia or intermedial experience, often incorporating magic lantern and stereopticon slide shows, live music, lectures, and special effects (Musser). Finally, because early film technology and the conditions of production limited the length of most early films and thus precluded the possibility of lengthy narratives, filmmakers and exhibitors often relied on newspapers to provide the narrative contexts and subjects for their films, making the print medium in many ways the "primary text" and transforming cinema into a visual newspaper.

Like the print media in the 1890s, the Web provided an elaborate narrative context for *BWP* spectators that became an integral component of the film's reception. In an article in *Brandweek* about the starring role given to the Internet in the marketing of *BWP*, Michael McCarthy argued that "for the first time, the Web site was more of a destination and more entertaining—in some people's minds—than the film itself" (56). John Hegeman, Artisan's executive vice-president of worldwide marketing, would

later insist that "everything we did—including the movie itself—fed off the Web site." According to Hegeman, "the Web completely levels the playing field; you can't out-spend somebody on the Web. . . . For us, it was the most important and impactful delivery mechanism" (qtd. in Stanley). "We firmly believe," stated Bill Block, Artisan's president, "that this will be the beginning of a wide-reaching franchise that will translate across all mediums" ("Artisan Entertainment Acquires *The Blair Witch Project*").

Although *BWP* receives only passing mention in David Gauntlett's "The Web Goes to the Pictures," Gauntlett nonetheless assigns the film the following privileged position: "The most notable movie promotion on the Web, in the twentieth century, was that for *The Blair Witch Project.* The movie, made to look like a real amateur documentary, was supported by sites which began to appear more than a year before the movie was released, fostering the myth of the 'Blair Witch' and the 'missing' youngsters who had supposedly made the film" (83). Directors Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez originally launched the *BWP* Web site in June 1998 at the Haxan Films site. When Artisan bought *BWP* for $1.1 million from Myrick and Sanchez at the Sundance Film Festival in January 1999, they envisioned exploiting the medium of the Web to compensate for their relative lack of funds for promotion. On April Fool's Day, Artisan relaunched their *Blair Witch Project* Web site with additional intertextual material, including additional footage presented as outtakes from discovered film reels, police reports, the back-story on missing film students, and a history or mythology of the Blair Witch legend. The next day Artisan sent two thousand *BWP* screen savers to journalists and premiered its trailers on the "Ain't It Cool News" Web site rather than on television (Maiese; McCarthy).

In his provocative theoretical discussion of the role of computer-mediated communication and electronic narrative in relation to *BWP*, J. P. Telotte "suggest[s] 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 . . . 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" (see Telotte's essay in this volume). As many articles in the popular press and trade publications were quick to point out, *BWP* was one of the most successful—that is, profitable—films in history when measured by its return on the initial investment ("Rhymes with Rich"). This profitability was

repeatedly invoked by the trade journals and in the popular press to challenge the received wisdom in Hollywood (i.e., the big-budget blockbuster paradigm). This "success" instigated a paradigm panic among Hollywood executives due in large part to the important role the Internet played in the film's success (Masterson; McCarthy; Gordinier; "A Hex upon Hollywood").

According to Thomas Schatz, Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) established the current Hollywood paradigm of the big-budget blockbuster event movie. Before the success of *Jaws* and other big-budget productions like *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), the movie industry was in financial crisis, committing "costly mistakes" through a "cycle of overproduction" that almost bankrupted the major studios. The success of the "event movie" *Jaws* established what Schatz calls the New Hollywood studio system through which studios hire independent companies to produce a small number of films for different production seasons (Schatz; Hollows).

The movement toward the establishment of the blockbuster paradigm can be traced back to the 1948 *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, in which the U.S. Supreme Court declared that the major film studios monopolized the production, distribution, and exhibition of films and consequently ordered them to sell off their theaters. Richard Maltby writes that after the Paramount case, "the logic of movie production changed, encouraging companies to concentrate on more lavish and spectacular features that would play for longer runs at higher ticket prices, and earn bigger grosses" (74). By the 1990s, fewer and fewer films were appearing on more screens as a result of "saturation booking" of films (usually on over two thousand screens), and the major studios have continued to monopolize the distribution and promotion of films through the strategies of multimedia cross-promotion and merchandising tie-ins.

Since the 1950s, the history of Hollywood has also been one of mergers, conglomeration, and convergence across different media industries in order to capitalize on ancillary markets and methods of distribution (e.g., television and cable rights, video and DVD rentals and sales). The major film production companies have thus become one of many corporations owned by transnational conglomerates for which films and television programs are secondary to other products and services. Media conglomerates such as Disney, AOL Time-Warner, Viacom, and News Corporation own several different media outlets and are thus able

to promote a film, television program, radio personality, book, magazine, or theme park across media formats and genres (see McChesney). During the 1980s, cable networks, satellites, and videocassettes provided new methods of film distribution, while advances in computer technology allowed for lower-cost film-making. Since 1985, "independent" film producers have released more films than the major studios (largely as a result of the afore-mentioned burgeoning cable and video industries); however, those films are often financed by major studios which also provide their facilities as part of the financing "package." Thus these indepen-dent film companies work within a traditional studio mode of pro-duction, employing hundreds or even thousands of workers to complete highly specialized tasks.

Of course, Hollywood has long produced "the low-cost inde-pendent feature targeted for a specific market and with little chance of anything more than cult-film status" (Hollows 30) alongside its blockbuster films. These low-cost films are useful to Hollywood because they allow the industry to experiment with new forms and genres and to explore options for future projects. In the 1990s, large film studios acquired smaller formerly inde-pendent studios (e.g., Disney acquired Miramax in 1992, and Ted Turner bought New Line Cinema in 1993 [now part of AOL Time-Warner]), thus creating different divisions or studios for develop-ing, acquiring, and marketing blockbuster and lower-budget "independent" films. Film festivals like Sundance and Slamdance now receive thousands of entries every year and function as shop-ping malls for the majors, mini-majors, and film distribution and marketing companies. According to independent filmmaker Todd Solondz, "Because there are so many films being made it's a buyer's market. . . . Places like Sony Classics and Artisan Films have so much material to choose from, whereas proportionately fewer films today can be distributed than before. With only so many screens, and the high cost of getting a theatrical opening, only the fortunate few can get to that point" (qtd. in Andrews 8). Nigel Andrews, on the other hand, argues that because "so much [independent production] has merged and mingled with the stu-dios, [it is] probably a golden age for the independent cinema *sen-sibility*, whether that's *Sling Blade* [1996] or *Shakespeare in Love* [1998] or *Three Kings* [1999]" (8; emphasis added). Consequently, the major Hollywood studios and their parent conglomerates are able to produce and/or distribute films with the aesthetic sensi-bility of an independent production (often with large budgets and

stars) while keeping those films firmly within Hollywood's economic and institutional control.

Despite this putative continued hegemony of the Hollywood majors, however, in his overview of the year 1999 in film in *Maclean's*, Brian D. Johnson observed that "blockbusters were monumentally disappointing" and "independents scored David and Goliath coups over the conglomerates." As Johnson points out, *BWP* was exceptional in this regard, "boast[ing] the highest profit ratio of any movie in history," thus transforming, as Tom Carson has noted, a "summer earmarked for George Lucas into the season of the witch."

To be sure, the production of *BWP* differed in important ways from that of mainstream Hollywood cinema and most other independent films. In opposition to the studio mode of film production employed by many big-budget independent projects, *BWP* employed a collective mode of film production (i.e., a student "project") in which a small group of people work cooperatively with a relatively small budget[3] using low-cost video and film equipment. Myrick and Sanchez describe their approach as "method filmmaking," in which the actors were given Hi-8 video and 16 mm film cameras and asked to shoot the film themselves with daily instructions and surprises provided by Myrick and Sanchez (in addition to food, camera batteries, and other supplies left for them along the route).

Indeed, even the words that greeted the visitor on the original official Blair Witch Web site (and used in promotional material) read like a "high concept," "twenty-five words or less" Hollywood pitch satirized by Robert Altman in *The Player* (1992): "In October of 1994, the student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found." And although the conditions of the film's production place *BWP* outside the New Hollywood studio system, the filmmakers' mainstream, profit-driven aspirations differentiate it from more radical films that exhibit an alternative aesthetic and oppositional politics. It is telling in this regard that Sanchez and Myrick told the *Austin Chronicle* that they were more concerned with the film's being "cheesed out" rather than "sold out" by the distributor, Artisan Entertainment (Savlov).

The involvement of Haxan Films in the production of Web-based event advertisements and television programs after *BWP* points to the commercial aspirations of this media collective.[4]

Judging from these post-*BWP* productions, it would also appear
that Haxan remains most interested in the medium of the Web as
a primary text. For example, *Blair Witch* co-producer Gregg Hale
was responsible for the development of freakylinks.com, the Web
site created to promote the short-lived Fox program *Freakylinks*
several months before the show premiered. Mimicking the mar-
keting strategy of *BWP,* freakylinks.com did not advertise itself as
a tie-in for the TV show, so many visitors to the Web site believed
that its purpose was authentic and that its Webmaster was a real
person named Derek Barnes (the show's main character) trying to
solve the mystery of his missing (and presumably dead) brother.
As advertisements for the Fox program began to appear, argu-
ments, theories, and speculation about the Web site's authentic-
ity began to proliferate, ranging from detailed rational argumen-
tation to debates over evidence and profanity-ridden flame wars
(the Webmaster had to intervene and moderate/censor the site).
The discussions on the freakylinks.com message board also echo
the earlier deliberations about the authenticity of *BWP.*[5] And
although the freakylinks.com Web site is no longer active, it sur-
vived beyond the television program for several months, further
suggesting the continued importance of the newer medium of the
Web to the cultural production of films and television programs.

Like that of its predecessor *El Mariachi* (1992), the low-bud-
get or "no budget" quality of *BWP* became an integral part of the
film's marketing strategy. Yet Artisan's frequent references to the
minuscule budget Myrick and Sanchez required to complete their
project are misleading, since, according to *USA Today,* Artisan
spent at least an "added $300,000 in image and sound improve-
ments" (Soriano). (Similarly, although Robert Rodriguez report-
edly spent just $7,000 dollars to make *El Mariachi,* Columbia
Pictures spent over $100,000 on postproduction and millions on
promotion and distribution [Susman 2].) In addition, shortly after
acquiring the distribution rights to *BWP,* Artisan spent $1.5 mil-
lion on the early Web promotional campaign and over $25 mil-
lion in total marketing costs (Stanley). Although this is less than
half of the promotional budget for a major studio blockbuster, at
the very least it calls into question claims that the popularity of
BWP simply fueled itself.

In his essay "The Formation of the 'Major Independent':
Mirimax, New Line, and the New Hollywood," Justin Wyatt
notes, "If Mirimax and New Line represent the most ambitious
and seasoned independents, their current claim to the label 'inde-

pendent' is much more tenuous." Since Disney's acquisition of Mirimax and Turner Broadcasting Corporation's merger with *New Line*, "the major independents, *Mirimax* and *New Line*, have served to polarize the market for independent films [by] . . . aggressive[ly] . . . buying distribution rights to completed films, with their efforts increasing the price of the product" (84). Following Wyatt, Kevin S. Sandler has speculated that "current unaffiliated companies like Artisan . . . will encounter greater difficulty in acquiring product at a reasonable price and in securing exhibition space for the multiplex screens" (87).

While this may be true for theatrical exhibition, as Artisan reminds us, the company is "rapidly becoming a leading producer of made-for-television movies, miniseries and series programming for the broadcast and cable networks" ("The Company"). Although Artisan can be distinguished from New Line and Mirimax because it is not a subsidiary of the more established Hollywood studios and their parent companies, it would be dubious to claim that Artisan functions independently from the economic structures of mainstream Hollywood production and distribution.[6] Artisan's 2001 merger with Landscape Entertainment has allowed the company to continue to strengthen its production relationships with FX, NBC, CBS, ABC, Court TV, VH1, Disney Channel, USA Network, TNT, Sci Fi Channel, and Lifetime. In addition, according to *Variety*, Artisan's new Landmark Pictures division will be devoted to developing big-budget features (over $20 million) for third-party studio release (Harris). Immediately following the merger, Artisan Television also entered into a first-look agreement with Fox Television Studios. These developments provide further evidence for Artisan's mainstream rather than independent status within the entertainment industry (Adalian).

For *BWP*, in addition to the promotional strategies for the theatrical release, Artisan spent another $20 million to market the VHS and DVD releases. In a piece on *Blair Witch* marketing, *Entertainment Weekly* not only emphasized "Artisan's capability to launch the film massively on video through its distribution arm" but also noted "the company's exclusive deal with Showtime television" ("Rhymes with Rich"). While Artisan describes itself as a "mini-major" ("Artisan Entertainment and Haxan"; "Artisan Entertainment Secures"), it is an unqualified major video distributor with one of the largest DVD libraries (over 6,700 titles). As Artisan boasts on its Web site, "because of the

caliber, quality and breadth of Artisan's library, the company's home entertainment division is able to leverage its catalog and use its marketing muscle to deliver entertainment software directly to more than 12,000 retail stores nationwide" ("The Company"). Although Haxan Films originally made *BWP* independent from the major film studios, Artisan's business strategies reflect the film industry's broader shift toward the increased importance of the control of distribution and added emphasis on promotion and marketing to maximize audiences and profits.[7]

The current unprecedented level of concentration of media ownership means that fewer and fewer voices are being represented through the mainstream media, making it extremely difficult for newcomers or "independents" to have access to the established media outlets to express their views and distribute their artifacts. And although Telotte presents the Internet as "a medium that . . . threatens, much as television did, to supplant the film industry," the history of media institutions outlined in this essay is one of conglomeration and convergence rather than the supplanting of one medium by another.[8] The 2001 merger of AOL with Time-Warner further demonstrates integration over supplantation, extending the Time-Warner media monopoly to include the world's largest commercial Internet service provider, AOL.

In his essay in this volume, James Keller has suggested that *BWP* was especially fascinating to journalists "because it seemed to confirm the continued viability of the American dream: two unknown filmmakers spend a small amount of money and generate fabulous wealth, and a small production and distribution company, Artisan, transforms a potential cinematic disaster into an extraordinary success." My analysis of *The Blair Witch Project* suggests that in the end the political economy of *BWP* may ultimately function to propagate a myth of independent cinema by falsely suggesting that this film disproved the rule of New Hollywood's hegemony in an age of unprecedented media conglomeration.

NOTES

1. Intermediality refers to the convergence, interaction, and connection—economically, culturally, aesthetically, and so forth—among various media. This idea will be developed more fully below.

2. These messages were posted to the Sci Fi Channel's *Blair Witch Project* discussion board at http://www.scifi.com/bboard/.

3. Even the film's production budget has become the stuff of mythology. Depending on the source, the cost of the original film's production

ranges from $25,000 to $125,000. Getting the correct figure is not important for my purposes, since any of these are extremely low by Hollywood standards. In addition, as I note, the film was given a substantial postproduction and promotional budget by Artisan, which complicates its status as a low-budget feature.

4. A diary entry that Sanchez wrote while making his first feature film, *Gabriel's Dream* (1991), is instructive in this context:

> Saturday, July 15th, 1990. 11:24 P.M.
> My views will come from the experiences of a hard-working filmmaker who loves with all his heart everything about motion pictures. So much love that he has made the decision to spend the rest of his life making and helping to make the greatest movies that he can. This person is also a very poor filmmaker. He's a struggling, crawling, sucking the scum from the floor and eating it director who's still in school and doesn't plan to make any money from film until at least the year 2000. But he's a nice guy, and ambitious as hell. He knows he's gonna make it. There's always room for talented people out there in the film industry. At least that's what Sally Fields said.
> ["*Gabriel's Dream* Diary"]

To the best of my knowledge, this is not a fictional diary.

 - 5. From: Cali [. . . :]

> Derek,
> All I want to say is I love the site and I believe in everything that is on here. I can't wait to see the show and see if you find out anything about your brother. . . . I'm really happy that you continued to run this site even after his disaperance [sic]. [Y]ou are one in a million and I hope you stay that way. . . . [G]ood luck . . . finding your brother.

From: Bryan:

> You people are really trying my patience. This entire site was created to promote the freakylinks tv show. . . . Derek Barnes isn't real. . . . They are all actors. The real Derek who responds to all the email . . . is probably . . . some fat, balding guy in his 40s. . . . The only reason I came to this site was because of the tv ads.

From: Lena [. . . :]

> Most of us are well aware that this site IS fake. It's a publicity hound for "Freaky Links" the new Blair Witch Folks/Fox show. There are SOME (not mentioning any nicknames) that refuse to believe that Derek isn't real.. but.. well.. he isn't.

From: veronica

> [I] dont know about any of you out there, but [I] feel sorta cheated by this being fake. [O]ne thing [I] hate is being lied to, and because this is just one big hoax makes me kinda not [want] to watch the show.

6. Writing in the film industry's leading trade journal, *Variety*, in July 2001, Brad Anderson urged the industry to "lose the [independent] label"

altogether, describing the term as yet another "dusty anachronism" that is "often worn as a fashion-statement and serves as an expedient calling card to the studios." For Anderson, "The once formidable ideological wall between big mainstream industry movies and small, risky, innovative films is crumbling."

7. Sanchez and Myrick hired an attorney after they became "irked at Artisan . . . [for] laying off as much as $75 million–$80 million on marketing costs [*The Blair Witch Project*] that didn't exist." According to a February 2001 article in *Variety*, "After months of haggling, Artisan Entertainment and Haxan Films . . . settled their long-running dispute by means of a $25 million–$30 million cash payment to Haxan" (Cox). At the time of this writing in December 2002, Sanchez and Myrick were still directing and producing two features to be distributed by Artisan, *Heart of Love* and the prequel *Blair Witch 3*.

8. According to Richard Maltby, the received wisdom that the rise of television greatly contributed to the financial crisis of the major film studios is erroneous. "In fact," he writes, "television in many respects perpetuated a studio system of production. Although the Paramount [U.S. Supreme Court] decision effectively prevented the majors moving into television broadcasting, by the mid-1950s the studios had entered television production and rapidly colonized it" (72).

WORKS CITED

CRITICISM

"$25,000 Movie Throws a Scare into Cannes." *Toronto Star* 20 May 1999: Entertainment Sec., 1+.

Adalian, Josef. "Fox TV Inks Mini Pact with Artisan." *Variety* 27 Nov. 2001 <http://www.variety.com>.

Allen, Robert C. "Vaudeville and Film, 1895–1915: A Study in Media Interaction." Diss. U of Iowa, 1977.

Anderson, Brad. "Lose This Label, Please: 'Independent' Loses Its Meaning." *Variety* 25 Jul. 2001 <http://www.variety.com>.

Andrews, Nigel. "Make Way for the Originals: What Is Independent Cinema?" *Financial Times* 15 Apr. 2000: Arts Sec., 8+.

"Artisan Entertainment Acquires *The Blair Witch Project*." 24 Jan. 1999 <http://www.artisanentertainment.com/Company/PressReleases/pr01 2499a.html>.

"Artisan Entertainment and Haxan Films Announce Plans for Second- and Third Installments of *The Blair Witch Project*." 3 Jan. 2000 <http://www.artisanent.com/Company/PressReleases/pr000103a.html>.

"Artisan Entertainment Scares Up Major Licensing Program for *The Blair Witch Project*." 13 Aug. 1999 <http://www.artisanentertainment.com/Company/PressReleases/pr081399a.html>.

"Artisan Entertainment Secures Production and P&A Funds in Unprecedented Financing Deal." 9 Nov. 1999 <http://www.artisanpictures.com/Company/PressReleases/pr110999a.html>.

Brunette, Peter. "Not Much There" <http://www.film.com/film-review/1999/13087/100/default-review.html>.

Carson, Tom. "Beauty, Schmooty." *Esquire* Apr. 2000: 64.

"The Company" <http://www.artisanent.com/Company/com_index.html>.

Corrigan, Timothy. *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1991.

Covert, Colin. "Blah Witch." *Minneapolis Star Tribune* 27 Oct. 2000: 28.

Cox, Dan. "Big Bucks for 'Blair' Pair as Artisan, Haxan Settle." *Variety* 9 Feb. 2001 <http://www.variety.com>.

Cunneen, Joseph. "Bored Wide Shut: 'Blair Witch' More Hype Than Movie." *National Catholic Reporter* 3 Sept. 1999: <http://www.natcath.com/NCR_Online/archives/090399/090399g.htm>.

DiLucchio, Patrizia. "Did 'The Blair Witch Project' Fake Its Online Fan Base? Glowing Reviews and Fan Sites Raise Suspicions that Hollywood Is Planting Ready-made Buzz on the Net." *Salon* 16 July 1999 <http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/1999/07/16/blair_marketing>.

Ebert, Roger. "Buzz on 'Witch' Sweeps Cannes." *Chicago Sun-Times* 20 May 1999: 44.

Fiske, John. *Television Culture.* London: Methuen, 1987.

Gauntlett, David. "The Web Goes to the Pictures." *Web.Studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age.* Ed. David Gauntlett. London: Arnold, 2000. 82–87.

Giles, Jeff. "Fear and Lusting." *Newsweek* 12 July 1999: 62+.

Giles, Jeff, and Kendall Hamilton. "The Joys of Summer." *Newsweek* 10 May 1999: 76.

Gordinier, Jeff. "Defy and Conquer: Once Considered Fringe Fare, Indie Films Exploded Right into the Heart of Hollywood—Signaling a Seismic Revolution in Moviemaking." *Entertainment Weekly* 15 May 2000: 26+.

Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." *Culture, Media, Language:Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79.* Ed. Stuart Hall et al. London: Hutchingson & Co., 1980. 128–39.

Harris, Dana. "Landscape's Cooper to Head Artisan Pics." *Variety* 30 Sept. 2001 <http://www.variety.com/>.

"A Hex upon Hollywood: The 'Blair Witch Project' Brew of Net Buzz and Low-Budget Thrills Has Tinseltown Spooked." *Newsweek* 16 Aug. 1999: 50+.

Hollows, Joanne. "Mass Culture Theory and Political Economy." *Approaches to Popular Film.* Ed. Joanne Hollows and Mark Jancovich. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995. 15–36.

Horkheimer, Max, and T. W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* New York: Herder and Herder, 1972.

Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture.* New York: Routledge, 1992.

Johnson, Brian D. "A Vintage Year for Flicks." *Maclean's* 1 Jan. 2000: 238.

Johnson, Jeff. Letter. *Salon* 23 July 1999 <http://www.salon.com/letters/1999/07/23/blair_witch/index.html>.

Kellner, Douglas. "Communications vs. Cultural Studies: Overcoming the Divide" <http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell4.htm>.

Lacter, Mark. "Blair Witch TV." *Forbes* 1 May 2000 <http://backup.forbes.com/forbes/00/0501/6510064a.htm>.

Macdonald, Dwight. *Against the American Grain.* New York: Random House, 1962.

Maiese, Nicholas. "*Blair Witch* Casts Its Spell." *Advertising Age* 20 Mar. 2000: S8.

Maltby, Richard. *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

Marceluk, Robert. Letter. *Salon* 23 July 1999 <http://www.salon.com/letters/1999/07/23/blair_witch/index.html>.

Masterson. Lawrie. "Movies: A Scary Little Film Spooks the Big Studios." *Business Review Weekly* 24 Sept. 1999 <http://www.brw.com.au/newsadmin/stories/brw/19990924/3660.htm>.

McCarthy, Michael. "*The Blair Web Project:* Filmmakers' Strategy Puts the Internet in the Starring Role." *Brandweek* 15 Nov. 1999: 56–59.

McChesney, Robert. *Rich Media, Poor Democracy.* Champagne-Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1999.

Musser, Charles, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907.* New York: Scribner, 1990.

"Rhymes with Rich: Driven by Internet Buzz and Shrewd Marketing, *The Blair Witch Project* Breaks Box Office Records, Stuns Hollywood, and Turns Indie Artisan Entertainment into a Major Player." *Entertainment Weekly* 30 July 1999: 34+.

Sanchez, Eduardo. "*Gabriel's Dream* Diary" <http://www.freebusmilken.com/gabriels_dream/journal.htm>.

Sandler, Kevin S. "The Naked Truth: *Showgirls* and the Fate of the X/NC-17 Rating." *Cinema Journal* 40.3 (2001): 69–93.

Savlov, Marc. "Into the Woods: The Making of *The Blair Witch Project.*" *Austin Chronicle* 19 July 1999 <http://www.auschron.com/issues/vol18/issue46/screens.blairwitch.html>.

Schatz, Thomas. "The New Hollywood Studio System." *Conglomerates and the Media.* Ed. Erik Barnouw. New York: New Press, 1998. 21–32.

Soriano, Csar G. "A Runaway Weekend for Roberts, 'Blair Witch.' " *USA Today* 2 Aug. 1999: 1D.

Stanley, T. L. "High-Tech Throwback." *Brandweek* 27 Sept. 1999 <http://www.findarticles.com>.

Susman, Gary. "Friday Review: 'We Call It Martian Accounting.' " *Guardian* 31 Aug. 2001: *Guardian* Friday Pages, 2+.

Tatara, Paul. "Review: 'Blair Witch' Not Just a Walk in the Woods," 22 July 1999 <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Movies/9907/22/review.blair-witch/>.

Taylor, Ella. "Cyberreality Bites: Boys, Toys, and Girl Trouble in 1999's Top Ten." *Nation* 3 Apr. 2000 <http://past.the nation.com/issue/000403/0403taylor.shtml>.

Wyatt, Justin. "The Formation of the 'Major Independent': Miramax, New Line, and the New Hollywood." *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema.* Ed. Steve Neale and Murray Smith. London: Routledge, 1998. 74–90.

WEB SITES

Many of these Web sites are archived at <http://www.archive.org>.

"The Anti-*Blair Witch Project* Page" <http://www.angelfire.com/hi3/ABWP/>.

"The Blair Warner Project" <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/lounge/3027/Blair.html>.

"The Blair Witch Ate My Balls" <http://www.chickpages.com/moviemavens/blairwitch/blairballs1.html>.

"*The Blair Witch Project* Fanatic's Guide" <http://tbwp.freeservers.com>.

"*The Blair Witch Project* Forum" <http://www.delphi.com/blairwitch/>.

"Blair Witch TV: An Investigation Into the Legacy of Elva Getts" <http://www.blairwitch.tv/>.

"The Burkittsville Photo Gallery" <http://sites.fastmusic.com/punkrock-award/burkittsville/>.

"Essential Guide to *The Blair Witch Project*" <http://www.angelfire.com/mb/Alison/witch.html>.

"The Real Aftermath: A Tale of Pain, Heartbreak, Loss, and Survival in the Woods of Burkittsville, Maryland" <http://home.earthlink.net/~mer-cblue/BWP/TheRealAftermath.htm>.

"The un-Official Anti-*Blair Witch Project*" <http://www.angelfire.com/pe/ealot/noblair.html>.

"The Wicked Witch Project." <http://wickedwitchproject.com>

"The 'Witches' of Burkittsville" <http://www.burkittsville.org>.

"The Witch Files" <http://www.ursaluna.com/witch/files.htm>.