

Sight Unseen

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The Blair Witch Project

EVEN IN THE present, a ghost story always turns toward the past. It has to. A ghost is a matter of memory. A haunting is unfinished business. A reminder.

I want to tell you a ghost story, but I don't know where to begin. We could start in the woods near San Bernardino, where I learned to pray by folding in half. Or in the boxed room I grew up in, four walls dressed in third-grade folk art. Or maybe we could start in a different wood, the ones near Julian, where I went camping with my dad and his friends each summer. Their boys, my age. The stream we swam naked in, unconscious and brave in the face of snakes and bears. Or we could start in Tatiana's pool, getting scolded by her mother for yammering too loudly about our ideas of what sex would be like. Or, we could begin in Winston-Salem, in the backyard of my cousin Andrew's house. My small body flying down the street on a bike I wasn't taught how to brake. Andrew chucking stones at me, yelling, "Go faster! Faster! Faggot."

Leading up to the summer release of *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999, IMDb listed the three actors featured in the film as deceased, presumed missing. To drum up interest, the marketing team baited audiences with the mystique of death, the prospect of witnessing the final moments of a life abruptly snuffed out. Fade to black.

At screenings, they handed out proof of disappearance, posters featuring the actors' faces like those on the side of a milk carton. No Q&A with the cast. Just the bleak air of their absence and a piece of paper. The public wanted to see, with their own eyes, how a person goes missing. But in the

distribution of materials, their want gave way to a collective unease. People left the theater, poster in hand, feeling haunted, like they'd just watched something they shouldn't have. Perhaps some wondered why they'd wanted to watch these people trudge their backpacks and cameras into the mouth of the woods in the first place. The trailer for the film told audiences they wouldn't come out. Upfront, the film said there'd be no happy ending. So why endure the inevitable? Why not look elsewhere? What compels one to voluntarily sit inside their fear?

Flash forward to 2008 and I am sitting on my childhood friend's vast living room sofa, watching *The Blair Witch Project* for the first time. Already living in the age of Internet forums and Google, I know the film playing out in front of me is a work of fiction. But knowing this doesn't make the watch any easier. My friend is playing with a gaming console on the sofa next to me, unbothered. Her fingers tap away at some animated creature while, onscreen, the grain and wobble of a camera pans to the scattered dead of leaves on the forest floor. "This part is freaky," she says, not looking up from her screen. And so I watch alone as a woman—Heather, the director of a film within a film—unfurls a bundle of sticks wrapped with twine that looks like dental floss. A pause. The two of us, Heather and I, stare at its contents, the jam-red of pulled teeth. A litter of tiny bones. Then, Heather screams and her breathing reaches a crescendo. She chokes on the air, then begins to weep. Her friend had gone missing in the woods the day before, but it's not the sound of mourning that I hear. In place of grief, there is fear. Heather is still lost in the woods, and in the brutal equation of present circumstance, Heather and her friend's teeth have been made equal. Neither of them will be found again.

IN THE EDITING booth, I flip through the stills, run back the footage. There's me, or someone who looks like me as a child, standing among other children in a circle. A college-aged guitarist strums a rock hymn, his arms covered in cut-out socks to hide tattoos still peeking out from holes in the fabric. My childish doppelgänger holds up his hands to the stage, trying to give them away. It's an unnerving spectacle to watch. I am so far away from a childhood

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in service to a presence unseen. But my boyish self is anything but weary. His hands clasp together now. His eyes shut. He is praying and singing at the same time, proof of his unwavering belief. The song ends. Is that a tear I see? God must be somewhere in the room, I think. I squint at the footage, zooming in and out. After a while, I have to admit I can't see shit.

MY FAVORITE KIND of horror film includes found footage as its central gimmick. Something about the awkward posturing with a camera in hand appeals to me, the want to document, to record a truth on tape no matter how dark or ridiculous it sounds in the mouths of strangers. I love the camera-holding protagonist and the doubling of self: there's always the performative-self conducting interviews squaring off against the actual-self reviewing footage once the sun goes down and the equipment is slipped back into its case.

And like any good hook, there's always a piece of the puzzle missing in a found-footage horror. No matter the story, the cameraperson wants to unearth the hidden darkness of the subject at hand, be it a commune of religious folk who seem dodgy when asked about their customs or curious decorum, or working-class townfolk who live beneath the shadow of an old legend. Usually, unearthing the secret comes at a cost. Rarely does the found-footage protagonist survive. And when they do, they usually return to the world possessed by some unseen entity or irreparably damaged by what they have witnessed. But mostly, it's the footage that survives. The demons of the world seem to ignore handhelds or SD cards. Where a body once was, an apparatus remains. The footage thus becomes a stand-in for the voice that is no longer there. The camera is like a ghost you can hold in your hands.

I BEGRUDGINGLY identify with the Blair Witch. Described by locals as a gangly woman covered head-to-witch-toe in hair, the obvious parallels to the experience of trans womanhood—the constant plucking and tweezing and fussing for the purposes of achieving that impossibly twisted feminine-coded hairlessness—arise like a fly-laden stench from some swampy creek. In the

face of crushing cis beauty standards, my desire to retreat into the woods and live out the rest of my days like Sasquatch becomes more and more of a pressing want. In this sense, the Blair Witch offers a radical template. Rather than pass in public as human, she opts to simply disappear. Indeed, what I latch onto most with regards to the Blair Witch, more than anything physical, is her anonymity, her refusal to be seen or captured in frame.

The Blair Witch gives a master class in nonpresence. While subsequent sequels attempt to glimpse her in all of her hunched-over, cryptozoological glory, I prefer the original film's commitment to the titular character's erasure. She is at once omnipresent and undetectable. She's there in the ornamental twig-art she leaves dangling from the branches of naked, looming trees. She's present in the ectoplasmic slime she casts upon film equipment and in the stone monuments erected outside of our unlucky trio's tents during the night. But thankfully, you never see *her* standing aside the products of her terrifying labor. In the gap she exits from, you're forced to imagine her there, arranging her nature in such a way as to appear foreboding. You're made to make your own portrait of her. What might she look like? How did locals describe her? What color hair? In your imagining, you have no choice but to abandon your need for closure. Whatever you come up with surely won't be accurate.

There's a moment in the film when, awakened at night by the uncanny sounds of childish laughter, Heather and Mike exit their tents into pure darkness, running panicked around the woods, but not in any particular direction. Just running, as if somehow the act of moving might keep them safe. Heather turns her head to the side, alarmed at something running beside her. The screen wobbles through the throat of the night, but doesn't once shift to get a clean view. Still, we don't need to see what Heather does to know her blood has run cold: her throat-shredding screams of "WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT?!" are enough for any bodily hair to rise in rapture.

But it's her. She's right there. You can feel it.

IN THE FILM classes I took as an undergraduate at the University of Iowa, my subject was always the self. I never made narrative work, too afraid of

failing my lofty ambitions. The self as a documentary subject felt more intimate somehow—truer, safer. For who better to know the intricacies of the human spirit than the human herself, pointing the camera at her own flesh? The logic was obviously flawed. For one, in order for the self to remain true on camera, another body needed to present so as to guide and redirect moments that felt emotionally false or overwritten. Without a crew, the directorial-self mistakes aloofness for candidness. Alone with only myself and a Canon 7D, there was no harsh truth I could offer about myself or the world as I saw it, only curation.

It is painful to glance back at the footage from back then. For one, I am a woman now, not an egg running from the prospect of trans embodiment. My face looks different, stranger-esque. My eyes shift awkwardly in every direction but straight. My hair is a buzzed-off blast-zone of DIY patchiness. My clothes drape over my wide shoulders like a sheet pulled up to cover someone's massacre. Stubble intrudes upon my chin, an army of black spots that won't wash out.

I am also not a good filmmaker. My shots are always too close, too tight, too obvious, and out-of-focus. An argument could of course be made for transness as a perpetual state of out-of-focusness. To do so here, though, would be to give my younger self much credit. My cuts are harsh, with no regard for temporal or spatial continuity. My audio buzzes with background static and conversations. My filmmaking is an aesthetic nightmare, caught between a desire for Giallo sensibilities and an underwhelming budget. It's hard to look, to see the limits of one's talent clash with the mind's attempts at grand flourishing. I could never get the tripod to angle the camera exactly where I wanted it. I could never stare into the lens in the private dark of my room and feel anything but mortification. How does the self as a subject build their own narrative, when they are simultaneously embarrassed by it? How could I give you the truth without first claiming it for myself?

Heather has at least one thing going for her: a crew. Mike and Josh are her cameramen, her confidantes, her buffers. While Heather is obviously keen on making a documentary on the legend of the Blair Witch, she is equally

interested in herself as a historian. We see her directing Mike and Josh from in front of the camera, reading off-scripted sections about witch trials and scared publics. These curated centerpieces for the film she wants to make come off as hokey, too practiced. In this, we are alike. It is only when the performance fails—when control ceases—that the work becomes interesting. Once lost in the woods, Heather chooses to document everything, from arguments with her crew to her own mental breaks. In the film's most compelling moment, Heather—defeated, tired, and hungry—places the camera directly beneath her nostrils and offers an apology. She is sorry for dragging her friends into the woods with her, for acting like she was prepared even though she wasn't, for being selfish. By the end, her face is distorted in liquid—a deluge of snot runs down her mouth like a river splitting into two pathways. Her eyes are dewy, glistening emptily in the faint light of the camera. It is a moment of realness that can't be faked, a desperation that functions both as elegy and what Heather wanted all along: the truth, plain and ugly.

WHILE AT SCHOOL in another state, my mom calls me and asks if I still have the short videos I made of her, my dad, and me, from the family road trips we used to take together in the summer months of July and August. I had forgotten about these videos, filmed with an old MacBook using the iMovie app. In each montage I sit in the backseat of my parents' car, wondering aloud when we will pull into the next hotel, when I might be allowed to eat something other than the rice cakes in the bag upfront with mom, or when I might have access to Wi-Fi again. These moments of bratty teenage narcissism are interspersed with shots from the window—the plains of America speeding past us, old towns with populations smaller than my high school, gas stations without patrons, rolling hills, sand dunes—all disappearing behind us. The natural elements I captured juxtapose starkly with the familial drama of being trapped together for five hours per day. But in capturing my surroundings and my childish wants, I also captured my younger self in the throes of great change. My wrist flicks and twirls with theatrical flair, emphasizing my disdain for parental company. My eyes roll so far back in my head as to become not eyes

but hollows of white. My voice, a product of California, stretches gravelly and fried across the footage, as though the Grudge decided to have a beach day. And my boy-coded version in all his budding queerness, the one who believed his room was haunted by demons, the one who desperately wanted to believe in a God that was on his side, who couldn't ride a bike but wanted to impress a cousin who performed boyishness more believably than he did, hit record and outed himself on video. I, in the present, watch as my younger self discovers her sense of body, her freedom, her entrapment. I watch her squeeze into a self that can't be denied. While the reveal may be unintentional, the self-consciousness—and the gradual shedding of it—works spectacularly on camera, bringing the film to life. It took me ten years to out myself again, to feel that aliveness rush in, and to name it as such.

Now, reviewing the footage is like staring into the eyes of a ghost. It is both me, and not. He is both there and gone. Spectral. Present.

I WATCH *The Blair Witch Project* at least once a year. With so many found-footage knockoffs being released at an increasingly rapid rate, it feels appropriate—like an homage of sorts—to return to the OG, the blueprint of effective camcorder terror-making. Of course, Heather, Josh, and Mike are all alive. But the witch is too. I imagine her, trapped in that wood, waiting to ensnare naive hikers for trekking too close. Or not trapped at all, but choosing to remain there, where mythology can't touch. It almost seems utopian, to exist perpetually unbothered, and to vanquish all who attempt to ruin it. To never be found and thus to never be held accountable for appearances. Listen. If you were to ask me to my face, I'd lie and tell you, of course she's the villain of the story. But here, on this page, I'll say it: The Blair Witch is no monster. The woods are not a trap. And if this were my film, there'd be no camera left for anyone else to find.