Bewitched:

HOW "BLAIR WITCH" ENTRANCED THE MEDIA

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In the summer of 1999, as a low-budget, loosely plotted, 81-minute horror film called "The Blair Witch Project" climbed to the top of America's box-office rankings, stories in the national media began heralding the movie as a new kind of cultural phenomenon: the indie blockbuster. With a nudge and a wink, the articles also noted how many people were falling for its grainy visuals and pseudo-documentary format. Viewers around the country, according to journalists, were impressionable enough to believe that the movie was an authentic record of three young filmmakers' deaths at the hands of a backwoods spook in rural Maryland.

In early August, a *Time* magazine reporter pulled aside a woman named Paula Taylor as she emerged from a Chicago theater where "Blair Witch" was playing to packed houses. Asked if she'd thought the film was real at any point before seeing it, Taylor replied, "You mean it's not? The web site made it sound as if it was. I can't believe it."

Not to be outdone, *Newsweek* found a male version of Taylor in 33-year-old Jeff Johnsen, who set up the first "Blair Witch" shrine on the World Wide Web. He told the magazine that at first he thought the movie was true

to life, and that "when I found out it was fictional, I just thought [the filmmakers] were geniuses." A late-July piece in *Entertainment Weekly* opened with a string of questions that aped the impressionable voice of a potential "Blair Witch" viewer: "Is it real? Have you seen it? Is it the scariest movie ever? No, seriously, is it real?"

The reporters relating these episodes could hardly muffle their scorn for all the naifs lining up at the American multiplex. (*Time* noted that Taylor was "stunned" to get news that the film was a piece of fiction.) Between the lines, practically every story on the subject asked the same eye-rolling question: How could anyone actually believe a horror flick posing as found footage of a documentary film project gone violently awry—especially one with such dime-store production values?

Buried in almost all of those stories, as it turned out, was one particularly rich irony: in their own way the reporters, too, thought "Blair Witch" was real. They and their editors fell, in some cases embarrassingly hardfor another ultimately false claim of authenticity: the idea that the film's success was a true underground expression of popular enthusiasm, unsullied by the forces of traditional marketing.

What they believed, in the end, was that the rise of "The Blair Witch Project" had been ineffable and beautifully mysterious, a triumph of do-it-yourself grassroots artistry over carefully packaged Hollywood product. In turn, the media's infatuation with that fiction helped push the film toward almost staggering profit levels, as well as a persistent ubiquity, as summer turned to fall, in America's cultural conversation.

The story of the remarkable box-office run of "The Blair Witch Project"—it eventually went on to earn more than $145 million in domestic receipts—is one that every aspiring filmmaker and wanna-be studio mogul now knows by heart. The movie was shot in the spring of 1998 by Eduardo Sanchez, then 29, and Daniel Myrick, then 34, who met as film students at the University of Central Florida. Filmed on 16mm stock and Hi8 video, using jittery handheld

cameras, "Blair Witch" tells the story of three young documentary filmmakers (played by Heather Donahue, Michael Williams, and Joshua Leonard—at the time unknown actors) who hike out into the Maryland wilderness to hunt down the origins of a local legend about a witch. In the process, the three filmmakers get lost, run out of food, argue endlessly with one another, and never come back.

"We wanted to really scare and truly horrify people," Myrick told *The New York Times*. "There hasn't been anything in recent memory that's disturbed people like such films as 'The Omen' or 'The Exorcist.' All the recent horror films have been sex-ridden and cool to watch. We didn't want that."

The film was shot in a single week. There was no formal script; Sanchez and Myrick gave the three actors a general story line to follow and then set them loose with their cameras in the wilderness. The directors left short, sometimes cryptic notes for the cast with suggestions about how to approach their characters' reactions to various crises. One typical message, hidden for one of the actors inside a film canister, read, "You don't trust Heather—take control."

The movie's central conceit—that it was constructed from footage the trio shot that was recovered after their deaths and stitched together in the editing room into a sort of documentary tribute—was both a stroke of genius and a limitation. It did offer beautiful cover for Sanchez and Myrick's own directorial shortcomings, suggesting that the film's shots were shaky, their composition haphazard, not because the directors had no filmmaking experience but because their stand-ins in the film, whose footage we are supposedly watching on screen, were themselves neophytes—and hungry, stumbling, terrified neophytes at that.

On the other hand, the flaws of the found-footage approach become obvious near the end of the film. Since its narrative is entirely dependent on the three characters' filming their own conversations and movement—there are no talking heads or post-mortems—they must keep shooting one another even when they are a) waking up, b) irritated to the point of not speaking to

one another or c) running for their lives in the deepest pitch-blackness of the night. It is at this last point at which the setup begins to fray: are we really to believe that a woman, awoken by a ghost she is convinced is trying to rip out her insides, is going to pause in screaming flight to strap on her camera and press the record button? But the story demands that we push forward, and so the film includes repeated instances of the three filming their own terror.

"The Blair Witch Project" began its ascent when it was selected for the 1999 Sundance Film Festival. There, after a midnight screening in January that aroused disappointingly little interest, a small but ambitious distributor called Artisan Entertainment paid $1 million for the rights to the film. Artisan hoped to build on the $3.2 million box-office take brought in by Darren Aronofsky's "Pi," another grainy low-budget debut, which the company bought at 1998's Sundance. Other distributors were surprised that Artisan took a gamble on Sanchez and Myrick's film. The only thing scary about "Blair Witch," competitors reportedly scoffed to one another on the frozen sidewalks of Park City, was how much Artisan paid for it.

Here is where the facts of the rise to box-office dominance of "Blair Witch" diverge from the legend that has grown up around the film. If we believe the stories that showed up in the mainstream media in late summer, the "Blair Witch" filmmakers huddled with Artisan's top brass—CEO Mark Curcio, co-presidents Amir Malin and Bill Block, and the company's 36-year-old marketing whiz, John Hegeman—after Sundance ended to devise a bottom-up promotional strategy that would rely, almost exclusively, on the Internet.

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Putting aside for the moment the facts that this version leaves out, it is worth noting that the underground part of Artisan's marketing effort, paired with the directors' savvy instinct about how their debut would play with young audiences, was very smartly conceived. The first "Blair Witch" web site, was

launched in June 1998, even before the editing of the film had been completed, and, like the movie it was designed to promote, was stripped down, basic, and devoid of winking irony or any other mediating forces. (Within a year the site would be averaging 2 million hits per day.)

Artisan's release and advertising strategies for the film were also deservedly praised. The distributor built up interest in the film by screening it at college campuses, and leaking word of its raw appeal to Internet film sites like Harry Knowles' "Ain't It Cool News" and to MTV. Artisan also whipped up a release strategy for the film that would put it, initially, in only a few arthouse cinemas, many of which were in college towns. On the film's first day of release, July 16, "Blair Witch" debuted in a mere 27 theaters in 24 cities. "We wanted to make it a hard ticket," Malin has said. That limited supply, combined with strategically driven buzz, created exactly the bottleneck of expectant viewers Artisan was hoping for. There were thronging lines outside many of the theaters where "Blair Witch" opened; images of those crowds wound up on the local news and in newspapers the next day, further stoking the public's curiosity.

The film did boffo business that weekend and the next, and by the time Artisan launched it nationwide—in 1,100 theaters on July 30, still a small number by the standards of a high-profile Hollywood picture—there was a true groundswell of interest in the film. Many critics, though not all, were enthusiastic, which helped. "Blair Witch" made $24 million over its first weekend of full release, a staggering number by any measure given the film's origins.

The success of "Blair Witch" on that weekend made not only Hollywood executives but also magazine editors sit up and take notice. *Time* and *Newsweek* immediately began planning cover stories on the film; they appeared two weeks later, both issues dated August 16, in a rare double play of newsweekly coverage that wasn't repeated until the AOL-Time Warner merger five months later. Of course, those cover stories were not the only high-profile media response to the surging "Blair Witch" phenomenon. Major stories began appearing as early as May, then built into a steady stream of

coverage by the latter part of July before flooding newsstands by mid-August.

If you put all that coverage together and look at it closely, some striking trends emerge. Perhaps most remarkable is this fact: as "Blair Witch" received more media play, moving from smaller outlets to larger ones, from the back pages of newspapers to the front, from the middle of magazines to their covers, the price for which it was reportedly made kept dropping.

An *Entertainment Weekly* piece from July 30, buried on page 34, said the price tag for "The Blair Witch Project" was $100,000. A *New York Times*

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piece from the same week, which ran on page one of the Arts section, reported that the film "cost about $60,000 to make." *Fortune*, on an inside story on August 16, used the same $60,000 number. By the time *Time* and *Newsweek* ran their cover stories on the film, also in issues dated August 16, the price had mysteriously sunk further. *Time* reported that "Blair Witch" was "budgeted at a ludicrously low $35,000." *Newsweek*, going its rival one better, cited a figure of $30,000.

In the context of these articles' breathless disbelief at the rise of "Blair Witch," these were powerful numbers—and indeed more powerful the smaller they became. After all, here was a film that had made $25 million—or, to use the *Newsweek* figures, more than 800 times its initial cost—in three days.

What accounts for that plummeting number? It is born, first of all, of a certain journalistic paradox that accompanies stories that make the covers of magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*. On one hand, editors at the major newsweeklies won't put a story on the cover unless it's of sufficient import, something that can be thought of as a truly national phenomenon. So the success of the "Blair Witch" in its narrow release, in 27 theaters, no matter how clamorous audiences appeared, wasn't enough for those editors; but a $25 million weekend, which came two weeks later, was.

On the other hand, once those editors decide to put a story on the cover, especially if it's a cultural product like a band, a television show, or a movie, they do not, under any circumstances, want to appear as though they are merely responding to marketing efforts or manufactured enthusiasm. To use a political example, it would be harder for Steve Forbes, who spent tens of millions of his own dollars to promote his presidential campaign, to make the cover of *Time* after, say, a strong primary showing than it would for John McCain, whose support could be thought of as somehow purer, even if his vote total were similar.

This little editorial back-and-forth was certainly going on with "Blair Witch." Once *Time* and *Newsweek* pegged their "Blair Witch" stories as covers, it was important to make the film's origins look as humble as possible, and the story of its rise all the more remarkable. And a film made for $30,000 is certainly of humbler stock than one made for $100,000, or $3 million, or $51.5 million, which according to the Motion Picture Association (MPA) is the average for a Hollywood studio film, before marketing costs.

And even the $100,000 figure was wildly low. That may have been near the amount that Myrick and Sanchez spent to put together the roughest of cuts. But films of all budget levels have extensive post-production costs as well, costs that are often included when the media reports on the price tags of Hollywood productions. And with "Blair Witch," these post-filming costs were substantial—not only in relation to how little money it cost to shoot the film but also because "Blair Witch" was made by unseasoned filmmakers. The version that Myrick and Sanchez first put together suffered from significant problems—in pacing, in editing, in sound quality—that needed costly fixing.

Many of those deficiencies became all too clear after a test screening in New Jersey in the spring of 1999, about three months after Artisan picked up the film at Sundance. The test audience hated "Blair Witch"; they found it confusing as well as physically unpleasant to watch because of its shaky look. After the screening, the distributor and the directors made a number of changes, including taking out some scenes shot on video and replacing them with steadier 16mm footage.

Artisan also decided to spend $340,000 remixing the film's sound. In the context of Hollywood's towering budgets, that number looks almost puny. But considered in relation to the original cost of shooting "Blair Witch"—the ever-shrinking number that the national media were so fond of citing—it suddenly appears a lot bigger. After all, just one round of post-production spending on the audio problems of the "Blair Witch" had already cost more than ten times the amount that *Newsweek* would eventually say it cost to make the entire film. Total post-production costs, according to most estimates, were between $1.5 and $2 million.

But it wasn't just the inaccurate reports of cost that were remarkable in the coverage of "Blair Witch." The way the media treated the film's marketing also lacked a certain skepticism. Many critics held fast to the quaint idea that films drive marketing campaigns instead of the other way around. In her glowing *New York Times* review, Janet Maslin wrote, "This little movie is a locomotive. . .pulling a Web site, a mythology and assorted tie-ins in its wake."

Other stories lavished several inches of copy each on descriptions of the Internet campaign, the leaks to Harry Knowles and MTV, the slow release schedule. But virtually no mention was made of what happened to promotional efforts after the film began to pick up steam with critics and the public.

John Hegeman, Artisan's marketing head, has an eleven-person staff. There is certainly no way he and those eleven people were going to sit back once their early efforts to promote "Blair Witch" began to pay off. On the contrary, they had no reason to redouble those efforts, to spend much larger sums of money on advertising and promotion. The web site had been the foundation all along, but in the first days of July Artisan launched a print and broadcast advertising campaign that was thoroughly conventional, and that intensified during the first two weeks of the film's nationwide release. All of a sudden, it was hard to watch network television for ten minutes without coming across an ad for "Blair Witch."

According to several industry estimates, Artisan spent a total of $25 million marketing and promoting "The Blair Witch Project," of which $15 million

went to advertising. Not all of that money had been laid out, of course, by mid-August, when the *Time* and *Newsweek* stories appeared. But a large part of it—probably between $15 and $20 million—had been.

Let's say, then, as a conservative estimate, that by the time the newsweeklies got around to putting "The Blair Witch Project" on their covers, Artisan had spent $10 million on print and broadcast ads. And let's use a conservatively high estimate of how much it cost for Myrick and Sanchez to make their first version: say $100,000. Using these figures, it appears that Artisan spent 100 times the original cost of the film to market it, a remarkably top-heavy effort by any measure.

None of the press coverage bothered to juxtapose these numbers, however. When reporters did mention the film's marketing budget, they called it low, with more than one article pointing out that the average Hollywood blockbuster usually has about $35 million of marketing muscle behind it. The MPA, however, estimates that in 1999 the average marketing cost for a studio feature was $24.5 million, or just about the amount Artisan would eventually spend on promoting "The Blair Witch Project" that year.

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Of course it was not just the price tag of Artisan's promotional efforts that made them so effective, but their timing—and the way Artisan enlisted the eager participation of the major media. After all, where were all those reporters getting their figures about how much the film had cost to make? From Artisan, of course. The price tag of "The Blair Witch" wasn't floating magically down by itself—it was being manipulated by the company, whose executives understood that editors would be attracted to a lower number as the film's success grew ever wider.

And this was about more than arithmetic: The media fell for pretty much Artisan's entire story line about the film's lowly origins. Myrick and

Sanchez, in mid-summer interviews, often joked that their film had cost about as much "as a fully loaded Ford Taurus," and quite a few reporters repeated that reference without bothering to mention that a fully loaded Ford Taurus costs about $29,000, while "The Blair Witch Project" by that point had cost about $2 million to bring to theaters and another $15 million to promote. The line was hardly a throwaway or off-the-cuff response—it was a precise, self-deprecating summation of Artisan's whole strategy in promoting the film as a scrappy underdog. The directors repeated it, more or less verbatim, whenever they got the chance. The particular choice of car, too, was telling: The Taurus is an all-American vehicle, far from extravagant. It was easy to imagine Sanchez and Myrick driving a Taurus of their own—beat up, dust-covered, and packed with film equipment—to those Maryland woods.

Why are all of these numbers and automobile references significant? First, because they helped Artisan in its seemingly contradictory but ultimately winning effort to market the movie as an unmarketed phenomenon. And also because it was the final surge of popularity, the one that took "Blair Witch" to nearly $150 million in total domestic receipts and has a prequel and sequel simultaneously in the works, that helped change some fundamental rules in Hollywood. Every major release now has an "Internet strategy" from its earliest days, and seemingly every studio wants to create its own realistic-looking horror film. "'Blair Witch,'" according to *AdWeek*, "might be the most imitated film since 'Gone with the Wind.'"

Plenty of movies benefit from early buzz. But truly authentic popular groundswells, no matter how large, rarely turn films (or CDs, or web sites, or books) into successes on the scale that "Blair Witch" eventually reached. It was the traditional marketing push that began in early summer and intensified around the Fourth of July, and the media's willingness to swallow whole any number that came out of the Artisan office, that pushed "Blair Witch" to truly memorable heights. After all, it is not Harry Knowles devotees, MTV fans, or college students who turn a film into a monster hit. These fans are the film-

world equivalent of the technology world's so-called early adopters, those who surfed the Web with Mosaic, who bought DVD players three years ago, who already own a digital video camera. These fans see films in the first days, or weeks, of their release; they were the ones impressing all those reporters, the ones standing in line in front of those arthouses on the first weekend of the arrival of the "Blair Witch."

But it is older, less adventurous audiences, the ones who still get their news on newsprint and on TV and not on the Web—the ones, in short, who read media outlets like *Time* and *Newsweek*—who make up the late adapters in the movie business. These patrons, unconnected to purveyors of buzz in its early stages, are the ones who turn a film into a $145 million picture, who transform an indie success story into the kind of film that startles an industry.

There were lots of reasons, in the end, for the wide appeal of "The Blair Witch Project." Given its budget, it was certainly well-made and artfully conceived, turning its limitations to strengths. Free of irony or smirking self-consciousness, it distanced itself from the contemporary crop of horror films, like the increasingly snarky "Scream" series. With its shaky documentary look and knit-capped 20-something cast, it tapped into enthusiasm among young viewers for reality-based TV shows like MTV's "Real World." It benefited from the raves of a number of older critics, many of whom clearly downplayed their quite legitimate doubts about the quality of the film in an embarrassing effort to stay current.

There was also something undeniably appealing about Sanchez and Myrick's personal story. Their operation was the cinematic equivalent of an Internet start-up, with the directors in the role of fresh-faced co-CEOs, using new technology to outwit the slow-footed Hollywood giants.

As the Artisan marketers well know, the American media still cling to a kind of bootstrap myth when it comes to creative work. They continue to believe that it's possible for unconnected young artists to scamper to the top of our cluttered culture on talent and will alone. The truth, of course, is somewhat more complicated. Much of the great run of "The Blair Witch Project,"

particularly in the latter stages of the summer, was spurred by its marketing strategy, both in its traditional and newfangled guises. Or, more to the point, it was the dynamic between the film's originality and the way the marketing team exploited that freshness that made it the most successful independent film of all time.

Consumers are more savvy today about filmmaking than they've ever been. They study the weekend box-office rankings, know which stars turn down huge salaries for a percentage of the gross, can wax historical about the importance of the John Hughes oeuvre. But of the finely tuned operations of marketing and public relations, which continue to be the dirty little secrets of the media-entertainment complex's steady hold on the American pocketbook, they understand a tiny fraction. The editors at *Time* and *Newsweek* probably never thought about letting John Hegeman share cover space with the stars of the "Blair Witch Project." Maybe they should have.