

Witching hour

by [Christina Bieber Lake](#) in the [August 25, 1999](#) issue

When a summer film grosses over \$48 million in its first week of wide release, we can assume that it is glossy and entertaining, perhaps boasting the latest special effects. But when that film has no known actors and costs a mere \$30,000 to make—not even a pittance by Hollywood's *Titanic* standards—something else is going on. The film has hit a nerve.

Such is the case with *The Blair Witch Project*. The film depicts three young filmmakers who hike into the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland, to investigate the legend of the Blair witch, who locals say has haunted the area for years. The opening credits tell viewers that all that remains of the would-be documentarians is the film footage that was found a year after the three disappeared. *The Blair Witch Project* consists entirely of this footage.

It is certainly not unusual for a film to delve into the supernatural. *Blair Witch* opened around the same time as a remake of a haunted-house classic and a feature about a child who can see the dead. But *Blair Witch* does more than deliver a good summer scare. The film has sent scores of people out to Burkittsville to do their own witch-hunting. The searchers have trampled through the town cemetery and caused such a ruckus that the film's actors have publicly requested that fans leave the town alone.

When Orson Welles aired his mock radio news break based on H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*—about aliens invading the earth—hysteria broke out. Cultural historians explain that the medium Welles chose—the radio news broadcast—was a medium people expected to report truth. *The Blair Witch Project* has provoked its strong response because it uses perhaps the only media that Americans still associate with reality—home video and 16 mm film. When the three fictional filmmakers head out into the woods, their director—a bossy young woman named Heather—lets her camcorder run continually. Because their search for the witch constitutes the basis for their documentary project, Heather films everything related to it. She enlists her friends Josh and Mike to help her carry a 16 mm camera and a DAT machine to record especially significant moments, and each character appears in the video or

on film as these cameras are traded around.

To create the effect of this raw documentary footage, the real directors of *Blair Witch* spliced together very shaky color footage from a video camera and slightly less shaky 16 mm black and white footage. (If you are subject to motion sickness, beware.) The result looks exactly like what many American families have in their own entertainment centers—random and unprofessional home movies with the voice of the camera-holder making comments on what she sees.

And nothing gets left out. When the characters become lost, scared and low on food, Josh and Mike get irritated with Heather for always having the camera on. In one richly ironic moment, Josh grabs the camcorder from Heather and tapes her as he badgers her, "I can see why you like this video camera. It's like filtered reality." But anyone who has ever protested being at the mercy of a video cameraman knows that when the camera runs all the time, nothing is filtered and nothing is (yet) edited.

In the last several years we have seen a substantial increase in so-called reality shows, like *Cops* or—more to the point—MTV's *The Real World*, for which the producers select young people to live together in a co-op type arrangement with cameras trained on them continually. At times *Blair Witch* seems exactly like the MTV show: its characters are very believable gen-Xers who behave exactly as we might expect under the circumstances. When they lose their map, they begin to curse and yell at each other, and the camera flies everywhere. The three get increasingly confused, angry and scared. And we get scared because it all seems so real; the directors do not attempt to show anything but what clearly lies within the realm of possibility. After all, people do get lost in the woods, and weird stuff can and does happen to them there. (As one character remarks, "Remember the film *Deliverance*?")

But realistic filmmaking cannot be the only explanation for the Burkittsville-bound audience this film has won. *Blair Witch* has also tapped into the belief that (to cite Emily Dickinson) "this world is not conclusion." Many Americans are investigating the occult, and young women are becoming real witches (Wiccans). One college student who went out to Burkittsville echoed the sentiments of Fox Mulder of *The X-Files* when he told a television interviewer, "I want to believe there's something else out there."