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Kicking the Map Away

The Blair Witch Project, Deleuze and the Aesthetics of Horror



The failure of the gaze: non-representational contact with forces of darkness (The Blair Witch Project, 1999)

(Photo appears courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)

Halfway through *The Blair Witch Project* (Meyrick and Sanchez 1999), in which a student film crew finds itself lost and pursued in a haunted woods, Mike admits to kicking their only map into the creek, declaring it “useless.” From this point, Mike, Josh and Heather must follow the track of an unseen, occult map, which leads inevitably to the center of a terrifying maze. Their fear and suffering are intensified by the persistence of their own map of experience (academic, middle-class, urban) which they still try to carry around in their heads, just as they hang on to the heavy camera equipment which weighs them down. I want to take that moment of kicking the map away as a means to re-theorize the horror film from the perspectives of Gilles Deleuze. The map of psychoanalysis, which has been leading us for so long in our interpretations of the horror genre, will be pocketed, and I will see how far we can travel without it. *The Blair Witch Project* is a good starting place for this move.

Psychoanalytic film theory offers valuable, but limited, insights into the horror genre, treating the plot, characters or viewer as analytical case-studies, seeking to uncover the “repressed” deep structures of early trauma. This is neither adequate to account for the affective registers of horror nor the aesthetic experiences offered by *The Blair Witch Project*. Theories of horror could develop fruitfully along what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call “lines of flight,” which they describe as “a fibre strung across borderlines constitutes a line of flight or of deterritorialization.”¹ In my attempt to conceptualize new topographies of horror, I wish to follow the “borderline” demarcating, on the one hand, psychoanalysis and, on the other, an “intensive voyage” into the horror film experience as mobilized by *The Blair Witch Project*.²

Setting the Scene: Limits of Cinepsychoanalysis

From a psychoanalytic point of view, the pleasures of cinema are embedded within the

ever-elusive dynamic of desire and lack; in psychoanalytic horror theory, desire and dread operate as the duality machine of Eros and Thanatos, the tandem of ambivalence. The application of psychoanalysis to horror involves the mapping of a pre-determined set of mythic narratives (particularly colluding with the Oedipal) onto the film's narrative patterns. Where Freudian and Lacanian film theory has characterized fantasy as the spectator's "*mise-en scène* of desire,"³ in horror, desire meets dread in primal fantasies of castration and back-to-the womb scenarios during which repressed material returns. Particularly in its Gothic forms, horror replays primal scenes and traps the present in the inevitable return of the more potent past of infantile fantasies. The application of this kind of psychoanalytically informed analysis yields predictable, and ultimately unsatisfying, insights; all texts are reproductions of the same limited set of infantile fantasies. Psychoanalytic film theory looks to content, not style, as it seeks the replaying of primal scenes and archetypal scenarios.

Another facet of psychoanalysis's strait-jacketing of a more immersed exploration of the experience of horror is its ahistorical nature and its disregard for the corporeal element. The film spectator, according to psychoanalysis, maintains a distance from the screen as a fantasy spectacle, and the deep structures of the viewer's psyche become the focus rather than "the materialist aesthetic of sensation, where body and mind are imbricated."⁴ The danger of psychoanalytical abstraction and its division of body and mind, lies in its disregard of the phenomenal and experiential dynamics of film watching. The spectator's fascinated engagement with the images themselves, and their potent affect, tends to be ignored or treated as mystification by structuralist psychoanalysis. Since the publication of Laura Mulvey's generative essay (which might be termed the primal scene of psychoanalytic film theory), other critics and theorists have sought to nuance Mulvey's rather rigid model. Still, the chief focus of such work by Kaja Silverman, Tania Modleski and

Carol Clover has been on representations rather than affectivity.

Psychoanalysis's application to horror, specifically, has been marked by these more generalized limitations of ahistoricity and affective denial. Barbara Creed, in *The Monstrous-Feminine*, has applied Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytical theory of abjection to horror film, fitting Kristeva's concept of the abject (the "in-between [...] which disturbs identity, system, order"⁵) to the supposed "feminine" aspects of the horror film monster. In this paradigm, abjection relies on the dichotomy of self and other—a dichotomy which, in Creed's theory, emerges as an irreducible opposition, despite Kristeva's original suggestive exploration of the fluid and gendered nature of abjections. While the interaction of psychoanalysis and horror has produced such provocative applications such as Creed's, the basic paradigm of cinepsychoanalysis emphasizes the deep structure of the unconscious, the primacy of the egoic subject and the need to maintain and strengthen ego boundaries. Plot events and representations are consistently foregrounded at the expense of sensory affect. Approaches to the horror film need to be supplemented, though not necessarily displaced, by a detailed exploration of aesthetics and the extreme levels of affective engagement experienced by the spectator.

Ways Out: Deleuze and Guattari; Schizoanalysis and Horror

The philosophical and aesthetic concepts of Deleuze and Guattari offer some solutions to the problematic gaps left by cinepsychoanalysis.⁶ They suggestively explore the corporeal "machinic" connections of spectator and text as they meld together in a molecular assemblage. Seeking to rethink the deep structures of psychoanalysis, they suggest instead the processual immanence of "schizoanalysis," a central concept in *Anti-Oedipus*, which blames Freud's Oedipus Complex and Lacan's concept of Lack as contributing to the repressions of the existing social system. They advocate the deployment

of schizoanalysis to assist “the constant destructive task of disintegrating the normal ego.”⁷

Seeking liberation from the oscillation between desire and lack, they posit the “schizo” (not to be confused with the clinical concept of schizophrenia as intellectual and affective disintegration) as an autoproduktive desiring machine. Schizoanalysis is materialist, concerned with tracing the flux of matter in its concrete assemblages and lines of flight. It seeks to reach the pre-Oedipalized and uncastrated “orphan unconscious” which is beyond all law.⁸ Deleuze and Guattari aim to “overturn the theatre of representation into the order of desiring-production: this is the whole task of schizoanalysis.”⁹

Deleuze also explores the fluid temporal machinery of film, which elides past and future in a present instant, which passes even while it is being manifest. Deleuze and Guattari offer an experiential emphasis absent from most psychoanalytic readings and regard film viewing as a process of transition and becoming. The application of these insights to film analysis offers the opportunity to extend current theory by providing a useful new set of tools to explore the experience of our engagement in horror film.

Schizoanalysis affords a way to re-read horror film by considering aspects other than the fixed surface forms of representation, enabling a focus on the material immanence of *The Blair Witch Project*'s world, its insistent incursions into the spectator's consciousness, and the characters' refusal to meld with it. Schizoanalysis and Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical outlooks are particularly suitable for application to horror, a genre of formal excess and stylistic extremes—over-saturated colors, special effects, disorientating camera movements and distorted sound—which undermine cognition and bombard the sensorium. In turn, Deleuzian applications have the potential to enhance our awareness of the operations of the horror machine in popular cinema.

Steven Shaviro (1993) and Barbara Kennedy (2000) have offered suggestive groundwork for the development of Deleuzian applications to

film such as the one I am making to horror. They also identify the significant theoretical fissures between a Deleuzian perspective and post-Mulvey cinepsychoanalysis, attending to how theories of desire and pleasure depend on the separation of body and mind (the Lacanian subject divided against itself; the Freudian ego a contested site between id and superego). Shaviro, working from a Deleuzian schema that centers embodied responses, reminds us that the image is not in fact a “lacking” and empty illusion (as Lacanians would have it), but is potent with affect.¹⁰ Cinematic images operate in the realm of “primordial forms of raw sensation: affect, excitation, stimulation and repression, pleasure and pain, shock and habit,”¹¹ to which the spectator responds to images with visceral immediacy rather than gazing at them from a subjective distance.

Pleasure for Deleuze and Guattari is materially based, immanent within sensation itself. Desire is thus not the product of lack or negativity, but is itself productive and automatic. The autoerotics of desire attain their consummation in “the nuptial celebration of a new alliance, a new birth, a radiant ecstasy, as though the eroticism of the machine liberated other unlimited forces.”¹² Such automatism is experienced via intensive states: “haecceities”—a “thing in itself,” a dynamic event of becoming—and not subjectivities.¹³ These states afford an intense feeling of transition without the climactic closures sought by psychoanalysis.

Via their technique of “schizoanalysis,” which I will be deploying as a concept relevant to the event of *The Blair Witch Project*, Deleuze and Guattari seek to evoke “a schizophrenic experience of intensive qualities in their pure state, to the point that is almost unbearable—a celibate misery and glory experienced to the fullest, like a cry suspended between life and death, an intense feeling of transition, states of pure, naked intensity stripped of all shape and form.”¹⁴ By means of this, the “beyond” of the pleasure principle is not the death instinct, but sensation itself in dynamic flux, a perceptual

immanence which opens up a new perspective on our affective experience of horror, a genre which foregrounds aesthetic excess, shifting emphasis away from unearthing an underlying dual structuration and toward an exploration of manifest cinematography. Cinepsychoanalysis's myopic focus on the scopoc regime as organized by Oedipalized, split, gendered subjectivity and motored by sadistic and masochistic operations, ignores the ways in which film energizes and mobilizes as it works in molecular assemblage with other bodies of matter. Deleuze and Guattari offer a way to account for these bodies of matter, which include technological, social and biological bodies, and the spectator's own materiality as a receptive and responsive organism. They suggest that there are "proximities between molecules in composition, relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness between emitted particles."¹⁵ Melded by these processes, affect is both psychical and material at once, in a "coagulation" of the regimes of humanism and science.¹⁶ Schizoanalysis allows us to explore "the machinic arrangements grasped in the context of their molecular dispersion."¹⁷ By this materialist cartography, psychic interiority is replaced by an immanence in which desire is process and energy: ideas are dynamic events or "lines of flight" which can take us into "a fibrous web of directions, much like a map or a tuber."¹⁸ Their term "rhizome" (or lateral, multi-forked root system) is used to suggest the nomadic movement of thought by the intensities of a processual rather than a deep-structured "self."

Schizoanalytic horror film theory, then, would approach the image in itself, alien to structures of signification, and mobilized by its affect on the incorporated spectator. Although the camera is set up, angled and moved by human agency, its ultimately technological apparatus passively records the object before it. This passivity enables it to capture what Georges Bataille calls the "raw phenomena"¹⁹ of immanent matter: the movie camera's technological automatism penetrates and melds with the flux of the material world,

removing perceptual experience from the idealizing tendency of humanist paradigms. Cinepsychoanalysis's refusal of corporeal actuality is resolved in schizoanalysis, where the affect of film may be explored as an event which acts upon the viewer. Material capture in space and time thus replaces, or supplements, issues of representation. The embodied "look" is also a sensation, which conjoins with other sensory areas such as tactility via the operations of synaesthesia. With schizoanalysis, it is possible to view the body not as separate from the mind, but as a perceptual continuum of mind/brain/body. All cinema (not only avant-garde texts which foreground their own construction) may be read materially via the flux of sensation which is film viewing. Denying depth and psychic interiority, Deleuze and Guattari insist upon the immanence of art as "a being in sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself."²⁰

Cinema frees perception from the norms of human agency and cognition and rendered primordial by its automatism. Film is "monstrously prosthetic" and composed of "the unconscious epiphenomena of sensory experience" and thus, it:

...crosses the threshold of a new kind of perception, one that is below or above the human. This new perception is multiple and anarchic, nonintentional and asubjective; it is no longer subordinated to the requirements of representation and idealisation, recognition and designation. It is affirmed before the intervention of concepts, and without the limitations of the fixed human eye.²¹

The directness of film springs from the stimulation of the optic nerve, agitating the senses and bypassing the cognitive and reflective faculties. Cinema is an assault upon the senses in a kind of "non-representational contact, dangerously mimetic and corrosive, thrusting us into the mysterious life of the body."²²

Deleuzian film analyses are not intended to supplant psychoanalysis with an alternative orthodoxy. They seek to challenge, but also to supplement, valuable existing approaches, such as the insights of feminist work on the horror film, by transversal readings located

in the interstices between the two. The appropriateness of applying Deleuze and Guattari's aesthetics to horror is exemplified by the "case" of *The Blair Witch Project*, an inordinately frightening, sensationalist film, even if its form and structure diverge from more familiar patterns of horror cinema. The film powerfully illustrates the machinic connection of text and viewer, with the cinematography itself offering a variant form of violence and excess. Notorious for its "sickening" visual style, the video camera zooms in and out randomly; images shake and shudder, irritating the optic nerve and causing physiological disturbances in the body of the spectator. Although the footage is supposedly shot in the immanence of "real time," the temporal linearity is confused by spatial, conversational and behavioral repetitions. *The Blair Witch Project* both exhibits the limitations of more familiar applications of psychoanalytic theory and illustrates the use value of a Deleuzian approach to the horror genre.

The Blair Witch Project: A Deleuzian Exploration

Film students Mike, Josh and Heather had set out to film a documentary account of their investigations into the Burkittsville Blair Witch Legend. They got lost in the woods and mysteriously vanished. *The Blair Witch Project's* conceit is that it is supposedly made from the lost students' unedited "rushes," discovered by a search party who failed to find any other trace of the student filmmakers. *The Blair Witch Project* is a picaresque, occult horror film with a non-linear narrative, unsophisticated "amateur" cinematography and a mysterious open ending. The horror is conveyed chiefly through character reaction rather than graphic revelation. Presented as a "documentary," it has a special relationship to the "real," given to us "unedited," set in real time, lacking the smooth construction of classic realist films.

Cinematic movement; sensory affect

The cinematography, *mise-en-scène* and dialogue of *The Blair Witch Project* self-reflexively

comment on the technology and process of filmmaking. A 16mm camera, video and sound equipment are part of the "baggage" the characters carry with them and lovingly protect. All of the events experienced by Heather, Josh and Mike are recorded, seen and heard through lenses and microphones; the plot, the characters' motivations and finally, the existence of the film itself, is dependent upon this technology. The inexperience of the crew and the raw state of their rushes is also the viewer's experience of the film as an event. Camera shake, blurred focus, lack of composition and extreme close-ups have a direct affect on our mechanisms of perception before reaching more advanced stages of cognitive processing. Our mind/brain/body composite is melded with the technology of cinema in Deleuze's "machinic assemblage" of material movement, force and intensity.

In *The Blair Witch Project* the conventions of classic realist film are undermined by the crew's inexperience and the lack of editing. The Renaissance perspectives and balanced compositions of classic cinema are replaced here by the documentary style of *ciné vérité* or direct cinema, the aims of which, according to Deleuze are "not to achieve a real as it would exist independently of the image, but to achieve a before and an after as they coexist with the image, as they are inseparable from the image."²³ This sense of temporal simultaneity is intensified by our viewing "real" events directly as they are seen through the viewfinder, rather than being shaped in post-production into the illusion of an autonomous fictional world with its own time-scheme. Our impression of live shooting is intensified by the lack of selectiveness: the film crew sets up initial shots, then experiments with closer or wider views and alternative shots, all of which are kept, rather than subjected to editorial decision.

Camera movements dominate our perception of the film and display the materiality of the camera, showing its technological limitations in conjunction with the human operator. The camera runs on unselectively, so we have lengthy images of a clump of trees or

someone's back as they walk away. Heather, Josh and Mike refuse to stop recording either image or sound, even in the most stressful situations, in part to protect themselves from the surrounding horror by, in Josh's terms, "filtering" reality through technological mediation, rather than directly seeing/hearing what might actually be "out there." All this gives the impression of "wild" shooting and seeks to validate the "truth" of the record. Instead of recording a reality that completely "co-exists with the image" like Deleuze's direct cinema ideal, these techniques achieve only a partial verisimilitude.

The source of horror actually conceals itself from the characters via their own technological dependency, an effect amplified in the final scene inside the house. Here, the disorientating camera movements that are so much a part of the *Blair Witch* experience (images jump and jolt as the three struggle through the woods and run for their lives) intensify, embodying the horror via technological apparatus. When Mike runs downstairs, the video camera records a dizzying spiral, culminating in a shock effect when he drops the camera, which autofocuses into an extreme close-up of the gravel on the floor. When Heather also drops her camera, her black-and-white film sticks and jitters into the final shot of the film. We do not see the source of their horror or witness their presumed deaths, but the affect produced by these swirling and jerky movements throughout the film asserts an ever-increasing agitation of the spectator's optic nerves, resulting in some viewers' experience of motion sickness, even to the point of vomiting, while watching the film. Psychoanalysis does not offer us any insights here, but a Deleuzian perspective suggests that the intimate, molecular meld between spectator and screen has taken place.

Deleuzian time and space

Although we are told that the crew are only in the woods for a week, the experience seems much longer. There are many signs of time passing: autumn comes on quickly, leaf-fall increases, and the faces of Heather, Josh and

Mike change from fresh-faced relaxation to haggard, gray tension lined with frowns. When Mike threw the map away and their spatial co-ordinates disintegrated, they also lost track of time.

Following Nietzsche and Bergson—not Freud—Deleuze proposes a model of time as flux and process (whereas psychoanalysis suggests the unconscious as a timeless zone, where past and present exist in simultaneity). For Deleuze, cinema has a unique capacity for making visible the relationships and workings of time; in cinema, it is possible that the movement-image can be superseded by the time-image such that "time ceases to be derived from the movement, it appears in itself and gives rise to false movements."²⁴ The body becomes "the developer of time, it shows time through its tirednesses and waitings...characters who have lost their memories in modern cinema literally sink back into the past...to make visible what is concealed even from recollection."²⁵ Deleuze's insights resonate with *The Blair Witch Project's* disturbing loss of temporal co-ordinates. The unfamiliar environment of the Burkittsville woods and the loss of their map undermine characters' memory functions. They are forced to focus on an unfamiliar present, while at the same time losing their sense of future—a blurring of temporal boundaries that leads to an apparent replaying of past horror in a re-animation of the malign force concealed in the woods.

The past has a particular status in the horror genre, often asserting itself on the present, like a ghost which lingers and repeats its own present which is not allowed to become past. Such insistence of pasts subverts a linear map of time. The ruined house at the end of *The Blair Witch Project* is a haunted space where the final events remain ambiguous, but it is clear we are to understand that in some form, past events are replayed, and the film crew gets caught up in the temporal loop, forced to re-enact victim parts in child murders perpetrated by a psychopath forty years earlier.

According to Deleuze, destiny can force characters out of their personal pasts to “affirm a pure power of time which overflows all memory, an already-past which exceeds all recollections.”²⁶ This sense of being lost in time results from a process in which attentive recognition fails:

When we cannot remember, sensory-motor extension remains suspended, and the actual image, the present optical perception, does not link up with either a motor image or a recollection-image which would re-establish contact. It rather enters into relation with genuinely virtual elements, feelings of *déjà vu* [...] dream images [...] fantasies [...] it is not the recollection-image or attentive recognition which gives us the proper equivalent of the optical-sound image, it is rather the disturbances of memory and the failures of recognition.²⁷

The film crew’s need to recognize landmarks, which may lead them out of the woods, leads to excessive efforts of attention, attempts to force memory. But they fail to notice they are retracing their steps, not moving forward in the direction they seek. Weary and disheartened, their failure to find their way out leads them to the possibly “virtual elements” of the house where a past which is not their own is replayed, forcing their participation in its temporal looping.

Josh, Heather and Mike, obsessed with recording and playing back “filtered” reality, are lost and alienated from their present environment by the superficial alternative map of “everydayness” by which they still seek to live. Characters such as these, Deleuze suggests, are

...caught in certain pure optical and sound situations, find they are condemned wandering about or going off on a trip. These are pure seers, who no longer exist except in the interval of the moment, and do not even have the consolation of the sublime, which would connect them to matter or would gain control of the spirit for them. They are rather given over to something intolerable which is simply their everydayness itself.²⁸

The sensory-motor schema of modern cinema is “shattered from the inside,”²⁹ by characters lost and trapped in uncharted ter-



Little boys lost: Mike admits to kicking the map into the creek (The Blair Witch Project, 1999)
(Photo appears courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)

rain like the Burkittsville woods where perceptions and actions are disjointed and spaces are left empty or uncoordinated. Time reflects spatial disorientation.

To an obsessive degree *The Blair Witch Project* disregards temporal ellipsis (in which “uninteresting” sections are cut) in favor of real-time shooting, thus rejecting classical cinema’s rigorous ordering of time and space to the precise demands of structured narrative. The chief editing logic of the film is not normatively motivated but emerges from a dialogue between two media—film and video. Heather’s black-and-white 16mm celluloid alternates with Josh’s color videotape, producing two versions of “reality” which present distinct visions of characters and events, undermining the consensual diegesis preferred in classic cinema. Melded in machinic assemblage with their equipment, Heather, Mike and Josh experience the fragmentation of the real as they strive to represent it. The different media edited together function as prosthetic extensions of the different operators’ points of view, reproducing that disjunction and dislodging any spectator position of mastery from a fixed center which regulates perception of space and time.

Sound in horror

Horror films are noted for their unnerving sounds which agitate the spectator’s aural nerves, both in effects, ranging range from human screams to synthesized electronic notes, and in extra-diegetic music. Studying the

“startle effect” in horror film, Robert Baird notes the “linkage to affect” which bypasses our conscious reason as we view.³⁰ He argues that our immediate perceptual systems make no distinction between real and amplified sound, asserting that films partly affect us by manipulating our sensory environments, “constructing energy fields we take, before reason, to be extensions of the physical world.”³¹ Shaviro’s Deleuzian reading also focuses on the “physical shock effect” of speech events and other noises, arguing that “far from reducing sound to the condition of language, cinema tends to ‘deterritorialize’ and disarticulate linguistic utterance, to pull it in the direction of nonsignifying sound.”³² Shaviro asserts that the deoriginating and deterritorializing force of the cinematic apparatus leads directly to the visceral immediacy of cinematic experience of both sound and tactility.

In *The Blair Witch Project*, most of the sound is directly diegetic, with no incidental music. Wild sound predominates; as characters talk and argue, their speech is often indistinct, adding to the sense of realism. When “supernatural” noises do occur, like the cries of children outside the tent, that they are recorded by the sound equipment reaffirms our sense of their objective reality. It is uncertain whether the bleating moans of Josh we hear are real or hallucinatory, but some of the most distressing sounds come directly from characters we do see, such as the sobbing, choking gasps when Heather hyperventilates after opening the bundle of sticks that contain viscera wrapped in Josh’s shirt fabric.

It is difficult to reduce the qualities of sound, their tone and timbre, to signification. Words themselves are not always amenable to meaningful discursive interpretation, and this is particularly true with much of *Blair Witch’s* ongoing chatter. For Kaja Silverman, writing from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, speech produces absence, not presence, because it is the currency of the Symbolic order: “the discoursing voice is the agent of symbolic castration.”³³ Deleuze and Guattari refute the structuralist division of words into *langue* and *parole* and characterize spoken language as a

“continuous, immanent process of variation”³⁴ which moves across the sociolinguistic field, undercutting the hierarchized distinctions of structural law and empirical instance.

Subject and object

One of the ways fixed cognitive structures are undermined in *The Blair Witch Project* is through the use of blurred and out-of-focus shots. Indeed, the first words of the film are of a man’s voice telling Heather, “You look a little blurry. Let me zoom out okay?” It is initially impossible to recognize the first shot as anything familiar, until focus is re-established. As the story progresses, Heather is revealed as indeed “blurry” on the inside, despite her frantic attempts to keep external reality in focus and under control. The undermining of perspective and focus that comes with the inexperienced use of filming technology operates in tandem with the erosion of the subjective coherence and ego-boundaries of the characters. It also affects the spectator’s cognitive operations and sense of control over the subject matter as our optic nerves and auditory membranes struggle to process confusing data. Like Heather, Josh and Mike, the spectator’s own coherence is undermined as we slide into what Deleuze would describe as a “molecular assemblage” with the body of the film.

The blur of subject into object intensifies as the crew wander deeper into the maze of the woods, and the viewer’s sensory participation through affective contagion intensifies. When the crew find the children’s graveyard of rock piles, our eye experiences ominous alternation between sharp focus and blurred focus as Heather counts the piles, moving along the seven of them with her camera/eye. As time passes, an increasing number of shots of the trees and the undergrowth are recorded. Rather than offering more information about the environment or identifying its details, the more we look, the more opaque it becomes. The landscape takes on an unnerving life of its own, when piles of stones appear outside the tent, coiled like grey organic growths which blend into the leaves and soil around them.

This process of transmutation of human into non-human and back again intensifies when the crew discover a group of anthropomorphic stick figures hanging from the trees in a glade. From an occult perspective, they are dolls used to mobilize the black magic operations of a hex and an ominous warning. For psychoanalysis, they figure an uncanny, schizoid doubling. A Deleuzian reading of the figures, however, considers the dynamics of “becoming:”

...all becomings are molecular: the animal, flower, or stone one becomes are molecular collectivities, haecceities, not molar subjects, objects, or forms that we know from the outside and recognise from experience, through science, or by habit.³⁵

If the crew insists on “knowing from the outside” only and reject molecular openness to the woods, they will not survive. The tree/human meld of the figures are fearful to them, and they refuse their suggestion of a hybrid assemblage of human and tree. The students’ retention of intransigent, cerebral human-ness in an unhuman environment leads to their eventual domination and destruction by the forces of the wood. The old house they find was in the process of becoming-wood through its slow ruination; it does, however still retain horrible marks of having “become-human”—and it is in here, not outside in the woods, that the finale is enacted. The audience, in our molecular assemblage with the screen, “becomes” more effectively than the characters. Unbound by the practical dilemmas and immediate discomforts suffered by Mike, Josh and Heather, we are freer to enjoy the sensory allure of the autumnal woods and their mysterious presences. The concept of molecularity facilitates the exploration of such engagement.

Remnants of psychoanalysis: resisting sadism and masochism

Steven Shaviro’s foray into a Deleuzian-informed film theory provides a well-needed starting point from which to move beyond a psychoanalytically dominated account of our fascinated engagement with cinema and other

moving media. However, there is a disjunction between Shaviro’s critique, which despite its efforts to wrestle free is still rooted in psychoanalysis, and Deleuze’s approach. In an attempt to undermine the dominant, Mulvey-influenced concept of the active mastery of the gaze, Shaviro deploys the figure of masochism to account for spectatorial fascination, aligning cinematic pleasure with the viewer’s objectification and abjection. The imagery of masochism also informs his evocation of the “blinding ecstasy”³⁶ of Bataille’s expenditure film makes possible for the spectator.

His perspective here is a binary reversal of Mulvey’s alignment of the male gaze at the objectified screen female with sadistic voyeurism, perpetuating the totalizing binaries of psychoanalysis and the eternal pairing of unequal power relations, consensual or otherwise. Like sadism, masochism requires a degree of distinction between subject and object, in this case the “violent” cinematic image and the “passive” spectator. For Deleuze and Guattari, the “artificial lands”³⁷ of perversions such as masochism are the home of “perverted machines”³⁸ which remain too abstract, representative and large to enable the immanence of schizoanalysis. My Deleuzian intervention avoids such divisive replication of distance between spectator and screen, focusing instead on the complex and fluid assemblage which is the film viewing process.

If the viewer/screen relation is molecular, then the spectator becomes an active participant in the experience, congruent with the film as event. A machinic assemblage removes the subject/object interface as the same material composes and the same force flows through congruent elements, inviting a celebration of the dynamic, experiential congress of spectator and screen image. In horror film, however, it is difficult not to experience displeasure and revulsion at certain moments. It seems almost impossible to remove a sense of subjective violation when “I” want to look away from the horror of the image and, in psychoanalytic parlance, rebuild my ego-defenses and refuse the invasive violation of self by other. For me, such a moment is Heather’s



Figure 1. *Pure naked intensity: Heather records her own fragmentation on video (The Blair Witch Project, 1999)*
 (Photo appears courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)

confessional and its extreme close-up of her agonized face, which has become the iconic image of the film in popular imagination. I find the exaggerated depiction of psychological and emotional torture here excessive and difficult to watch (*figure 1*). At such moments, I also draw back from my molecular delight to recall the “molar” and social gender imbalance, and again become uneasily aware of the proliferation of images of suffering and terrified women in horror film.

It is difficult not to find some aspects of Shaviro’s masochistic interpretation helpful here. He describes being “powerless not to see” in Dario Argento’s films, when

the unstable screen image holds my distracted attention captive; I do not have the ability to look away [...] as I watch, I have no presence of mind [...] my responses are not internally motivated and are not spontaneous; they are forced upon me from beyond. Scopophilia is then the opposite of mastery: it is a forced, ecstatic abjection before the image.³⁹

Deleuzian theory does afford a space for this kind of hybrid response; the concept of the interstitial reading allows molecular and molar frames to co-exist. There does appear to be a special relation of passivity at moments in horror spectatorship, where the psychoanalytic concept of masochism offers a useful exploratory tool which can operate in consilience with Deleuze in a transversal line of flight. This interdisciplinary approach could be relevant to a consideration of the nature of the horror of *The Blair Witch Project*. If masochism is the dominant perversion here, the audience shares the fearful yet pleasurable passivity and helplessness of Mike, Heather and Josh as their debasement is performed before us. This masochistic empathy is perhaps increased if we are aware of the circumstances in which the film was shot and the actual discomfort and anxiety experienced by the actors (whose real names are used) in the cause of “authenticity.”⁴⁰ The still active fan culture which sprung up on websites in response to the film itself and its

promotional hype could be further evidence of participatory empathy—or the continuing assemblage of spectator and artefact in masochistic complicity.⁴¹

As well as affording a theory of masochism, psychoanalysis would locate the film's horror as the replaying of a primal fantasy of regression and return to the womb. The "haunted house" is a symbol of the mother's body rendered uncanny by Oedipal taboo. The damaging of the ego defenses by the return of the repressed could possibly lead to malfunctioning object cathexis and schizoid delusions.

A Deleuzian perspective on *The Blair Witch Project* offers both a reading of the stylistic specificity of the film and opens up a new approach to the horror genre. It locates horror in our own sensory affect, in our jarred and confused optic and aural nerves and our haptic projections of other sensations engendered by cinematography and sound. We also respond imaginatively by sympathetic mimicry of the characters' sufferings. A consideration of "becoming" could locate the horror in the inability of the crew to adapt and open up to their new environment, or welcome its otherness. For the characters, the tree-people, emblems of the body/wood meld, are frightening rather than exhilarating markers. A psychoanalytic reading of the fantasy here might suggest that the uncanny objects encountered in the woods are paranoid delusions or the full blown hallucinations of (shared) psychosis, a reading supported by the fact that the crew never manages to capture the monster on film, and the ending remains open. Mental disintegration, not death, could be their final condition.

Deleuzian and psychoanalytic perspectives on the film are not necessarily antithetical. They may be fruitfully used in tandem, to interact and supplement the other's shortcomings. Psychoanalysis offers considerable insights into the possible origins of horror in its model of the primal taboo, its violation and attendant psychic disintegration. Deleuzian concepts extend this position by enabling us to explore the direct materiality of fear and the aesthetics of horror.

Conclusions: Deleuze and Horror Film

Horror overtly displays an intensive and insistent materiality, with an avowed sensationalist goal of physically affecting the audience, involving, as noted by Linda Williams, an "almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen."⁴² Shaviro further notes how the genre focuses on agitated bodies and also agitate the body of the spectator in a "shockingly direct way."⁴³ Horror short-circuits fantasy mechanisms and disembodied imaginings and "excitedly seek[s] to incise those imaginings in [my] very flesh."⁴⁴ For him, Deleuzian explorations of film, which trace our surrender to the fascination of images are preferable to those paradigms like cinepsychoanalysis and structuralism with their "psychoanalytic reserve and hermeneutic suspicion" which seeks to uncover deep structures and fix meanings.⁴⁵ The Deleuzian focus on the embodied spectator seeks to capture the fluctuations of attraction and repulsion as we directly experience them on our nerve-endings.

There are, however, some further gaps in this neo-aesthetic of immanence. Its lack of suitability for broad ideological and cultural analyses belies its claim to "materialism" by deliberately stripping the concept of its "molar" Marxist dimensions. Bio-aesthetics could be viewed as a regressive move back to recapture the immediacy of unfiltered perception lost in adulthood. It could be seeking a return to a golden age, not to the blissful dyad with the mother but to the pristine, undifferentiated vision of infancy. It claims a "scientific" perspective in its analysis of molecular phenomena, but disregards the empirical "hardwiring" of the human perceptual system towards increasing differentiation and cognition, a process which occurs prior to, but helps to form, structured conceptual ideation.

To help us explore the horror film experience, it seems necessary to retain some elements of modernist discourse as well as developing our understanding of the physical processes of affective cognition. Fear, terror and

desire have dynamic specificity, which might well go out of focus if we look too closely at the molecules which compose them. A neo-aesthetics of horror film is long overdue, and Deleuze's approach offers a concrete and medium-specific way in to extend our awareness of the genre's aesthetic. I advocate the need to make transversal connections across existing approaches; it is time to pocket the map, but not to kick it into the creek just yet. ■

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NOTES

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1980) 249.

² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H.R. Lane (London: Athlone, 1984) 319.

³ James Donald, ed., *Fantasy and the Cinema* (London: BFI, 1989) 1.

⁴ Barbara M. Kennedy, *Deleuze and Cinema: The Aesthetics of Sensation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) 15.

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 4.

⁶ Jungian depth psychology, concerned with unveiling the occult significance of symbols, does not take our exploration of the affective aesthetics of horror film any further. It would interpret the woods as the Collective Unconscious where numinous archetypes, such as the anima (the ambivalent female figure) are unsuccessfully encountered. This leads to the failure of the differentiation process, caused by the crew's inability to deal with an aspect of their "shadow" side. The therapeutic fantasy function of the film would be problematic, however, due to its lack of visible archetypes. A Jungian perspective might be helpful when applied to emblematic components of *mise-en-scène*, but offers little on cinematography.

⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 342.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁰ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹² Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 18.

¹³ A haecceity—a "thing in itself"—is not a fixed structure like the concept of subjectivity (an autonomous, fixed essence inherent in the individual), rather, a haecceity is a dynamic event of becoming. Deleuze and Guattari write, "You are longitude and latitude, a set of speeds and slownesses between unformed particles, a set of non-subjectified affects" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 262).

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 18.

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 275.

¹⁶ I borrow the word from Kennedy (47).

¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 323.

¹⁸ Kennedy, 69.

¹⁹ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, Allan Stoekl, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) 16.

²⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. G. Burchill and H. Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1991) 164.

²¹ Shaviro, 31.

²² *Ibid.*, 258.

²³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta. (London: Athlone, 1989) 38.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, xi. These and the following comments Deleuze makes in relation to Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

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²⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁰ Robert Baird, "The Startle Effect," *Film Quarterly* 53:5 (Spring 2000) 20.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

³² Shaviro, 34.

³³ Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992) 43.

³⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 103.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

³⁶ Shaviro, 45.

³⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 318.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 322

³⁹ Shaviro, 49.

⁴⁰ The actors were not let in on the antics of the filmmakers, who set out to literally and really scare them, rather than rely on the actors' *performances* of fright.

⁴¹ On January 30, 2002, there were 119,000 websites connected to the film on the Google search-engine.

⁴² Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (5th edition) Leo Braudy and Marshal Cohen, eds. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 704.

⁴³ Shaviro, 55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.