

## **Where fact and fiction merge: The reception of ,The Blair Witch Project‘<sup>1</sup>**

### *0. Introduction*

Our present day media environment is characterised by an increasing proliferation of what we call hybrid media products: media products which transcend the traditional dichotomy between fact and fiction, which combine elements of both, sometimes in a deliberately playful manner (cf. Roscoe & Hight, 2001). Recent examples include reality tv, the docu soap, the docu drama - and, most recently, the pseudo-documentary, such as the entirely fictional horror film *The Blair Witch Project* that comes along in the guise of a documentary commemorating three student filmmakers who perished in their search for the supposedly famous Blair Witch. To the extent that they do not fit into readily available genre schemata, such hybrid media products pose a special challenge to their recipients: Are the recipients capable of recognizing them for what they are: yet another variation upon the ,These papers were left to me by my friend upon his deathbed“-theme - or are they taken in by the hoax and do indeed, at least temporarily, consider these products to be fact?

In the following, we will present the results of a study where we addressed precisely this question, focusing on the reception of the said *Blair Witch Project*. We will begin by describing in somewhat greater detail the ways in which the film combines elements of fact and fiction and will then go on to the study itself: a content analysis of e-mails in newsgroups on the internet where the film was being discussed.

### *1. The Blair Witch Project*

First announcements of the film began to appear early in 1999 on the internet, reading as follows: „In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland, while shooting a documentary ... A year later, their footage was found.“ (<http://www.blairwitch.com>). In the announcement, the film is thus presented as a case of non-fiction twice-over: a documentary of the documentary material filmed by the three students gone missing. This claim to documentary status is further supported by yet another documentary about the documentary called *The Curse of the Blair Witch* containing additional material relating to the three students which was aired shortly before the release of

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the film on the American Sci-Fi-Channel. The claim continues to be upheld both in the course of the film itself and on the internet site accompanying it. The internet site contains no statement whatsoever to the effect that the material presented there is ‚in fact‘ fictional. The film does comprise such a statement in the form of a disclaimer which is, however, presented only at the very end of the credits following the film - i.e. at a time when most viewers will already have left the theatre. On a paratextual level, almost all signals thus point in the direction of: This is a documentary!

We assume that the reality status of a media product can be evaluated under three perspectives. The first of these is product type which was just discussed. The remaining two are mode and content: the degree to which the product is perceived as realistic, to which it feels like ‚real life‘, and the plausibility or implausibility of the content (cf. Nickel-Bacon, Groeben & Schreier, 2000; Rothmund, Schreier & Groeben, 2001).

As for mode, the pictures in the film are grainy, of deliberately bad, amateurish quality, made with a 16mm hand-held camera. All of this goes to demonstrate: This is the original material filmed by the three students! On the internet, it is the sheer wealth of the material that supports the claim to documentary status: There are photos of the three students, interviews with their relatives and friends, news reels on television concerning the search for the three students, excerpts from the diary that was supposedly found with the film material, etc. All of this makes an extremely authentic impression.

When it comes to the content of the film, however, it becomes obvious that *The Blair Witch Project* cannot possibly be a documentary. Of course it is perfectly possible that three film students are attracted to an old legend about a witch and set out for three days and nights to make a documentary about her supposed haunts. And of course human knowledge is fallible, but according to all we know about the world at the beginning of the 21st century, witches who continue to wander the world years after their physical death, demanding their human victims, simply do not exist. In addition, the elements of the horror genre loom large: woods in the darkness, fear, inexplicable noises... It is thus on the content level that the film's claim to documentary status - that is unambiguously upheld with respect to presentation mode and almost unambiguously on the paratextual level - finally breaks down (for a more detailed analysis cf. Groeben & Schreier, 2000).

## 2. A content analysis of viewers' reactions

In order to study viewers' reactions to the film, we carried out a content analysis of contributions to newsgroup discussions of the film on the internet, i.e. of spontaneous

reactions of the viewers to the film. A first convenience sample of 602 mails served to construct the coding schedule. For the main study a random sample of 1.157 e-mails written between June 1999 and February 2001 was drawn from a total of more than 27.000 e-mails containing the search term ‚Blair Witch Project‘.

A first coding schedule was used to determine what percentage of those 1.157 mails actually addressed questions of fact and fiction concerning either the product type, the mode, or the content of the film. This schedule distinguished only between ‚relevant‘ and ‚irrelevant‘ mails. Trial codings yielded an interrater coefficient of 0.72, showing the schedule to be sufficiently reliable (cf. Landis & Koch, 1977, p. 165). Analysis of the sample of 1.157 mails showed that altogether 319, i.e. 27.3%, addressed questions concerning the reality status of the film; other topics not concerning the reality status include for instance the general liking of the film, the quality of the video or the digitalised version, and so on. Among the relevant mails, 109 are written in German and 210 in English. If one takes into account the date when the mails were written, it can be seen that the rate of relevant mails drops sharply around six months after the release of the film. Until then, the reality status of the film is a topic in 38.6% of the e-mails; after that date, the average percentage of relevant mails is only 6.7%. In the months immediately following the release of the film, the question of fact versus fiction is thus by no means a minor topic.

The second coding schedule served to determine more precisely in what way the reality status of the film is discussed in those mails previously coded as relevant. Here we distinguish between five top level categories: discussion of the product type, the plausibility of the content, the realism of the presentation and, in addition, the reception experience. We further added an inductive category ‚Playful reference to ‚fact‘ and ‚fiction‘‘ as well as a category ‚Other‘. The full coding schedule, including all subcategories, comprises 52 categories. The interrater coefficients vary between 0.66 and 0.88, i.e. between almost perfect and substantial values (cf. Landis & Koch, 1977, p. 165).

Category	Coding Frequency
Product Type	148
Content	78
Mode	191
Playful reference	27
Other	37

*Table 1: Coding frequencies for ‚relevant‘ mails across categories*

As shown in table 1, discussion of the reality status of the film takes place in the e-mails with respect to all three perspectives: product type, content, and mode, mode being the aspect that

is mentioned with greatest frequency, followed by product type and content. By comparison, playful references to issues of ‚fact‘ and ‚fiction‘ as well as ‚other‘ considerations concerning the reality status of the film are much more rare.

In the following, we will concentrate on those results concerning the discussion of the product type of the film. We coded first of all whether the viewers referred to the film as a case of fiction, non-fiction, something in-between (i.e. a hybrid), or whether they were ambivalent; we also assessed whether they did so by asking whether the film was fiction or non-fiction, whether they asserted that it was one or the other, whether they expressed a change of opinion with respect to the product type of the film, or whether they were uncertain.

	NF	Hybrid	Fiction	Ambiguous	Total
Question	5	1	1	21	28
Assertion	2	2	56	-	60
Change of op.	-	-	7	-	7
Total	7	3	64	21	95

*Table 2: Coding frequencies for e-mails concerning product type*

As can be seen in table 2, the question whether the film constitutes fact or fiction is addressed by altogether 95 persons; of these, the majority - 58 persons or 61% - are certain that the film constitutes either fiction or a hybrid. While the film is hardly ever asserted to be non-fiction (only 2 participants express this conviction), the remaining cells add up to 37 persons who are at least temporarily uncertain as to the product type of the film, that is 37%, i.e. by no means a negligible part of the sample.

Next, we looked at the reasons why the discussants considered the film to be fact or fiction respectively. Since the ‚fiction-view‘ predominated, most of the reasons were given in order to support the position that the film was not ‚for real‘. Viewers supported this position most frequently by referring to the marketing strategy behind the film. They also said that they had heard something to this effect in other media products. Only four viewers mentioned the disclaimer included at the very end of the film, and only three pointed out that many elements of the film were at odds with our present-day knowledge about the world.

Among those participants favouring the view that the film might be non-fictional, one reason clearly predominates, and that is the reference to other media products, such as the Sci-Fi ‚documentary‘ *The Curse of the Blair Witch*.

Just a few words concerning the discussion of the film with respect to mode and to content: Where the mode is concerned, the viewers largely agree in that the film is made in a very realistic manner; and many of them can actually feel for themselves the fear the three student

filmmakers must have experienced in the woods at night. As for content, the film is considered rather too implausible. Incidentally, this evaluation does not refer to witches and the like. Rather, the viewers find it implausible that the three students should not have managed to find a way out of the woods, that they did not apparently know how to use a compass, and so on (cf. in greater detail Schreier, Navarra & Groeben, 2002).

### *3. Discussion and outlook*

The study shows in the first place that the majority of recipients correctly perceive the film to be fiction or a hybrid; they thus see through the way the producers playfully combine fictional and factual elements. More than one third of the recipients, however, are at least temporarily uncertain as to whether the film is fact or fiction. Considering this uncertainty, the reasons why the viewers tend towards one view or the other are of particular importance. In this respect, our study bears witness to what has been termed the increasing mediatisation of our society: the way various media products are intertextually related, the way one media product refers to another, and the way in which events are ‚made‘ by the media. For the majority of reasons which the viewers give to support their point of view make some kind of reference to other media or the media system. This is especially true with respect to those who consider the possibility that the film might be ‚for real‘. But even those viewers who argue that the film must be fiction hardly ever do so with reference to the disclaimer or to the blatantly unreal and impossible elements of the film. Recipients of at least this hybrid media product, even when they correctly consider the film and the accompanying internet site to be fiction, thus do not appear to make use of the most unambiguous cues available.

Up to this point, however, our results are only preliminary. This is mostly because of the population we drew upon: participants in discussions in newsgroups on the internet. Obviously, this population is somewhat selective; results can therefore not be generalised to all viewers of the film. Our results should thus be cross-validated - which we have in fact started to do in two ways. Our first approach is to compare newsgroup discussions of *Blair Witch* to newsgroup discussion of another, straightforwardly fictional horror film, *The Sixth Sense*, which was released at approximately the same time as *Blair Witch* and was likewise a surprise success, although for different reasons. While the material is still being coded, one result is already clear: The question of whether the film is fact or fiction does simply not play a part in the discussion, not even in the sense that discussants assert the fictional status of *The Sixth Sense*. The fact that this issue is mentioned 95 times in the discussion of *Blair Witch*

thus constitutes evidence of the temporary confusion of the viewers - even in those cases where they assert the film to be fiction.

Our second approach is to conduct an interview study concerning another pseudo-documentary, this time published exclusively via the internet: the search for the supposed serial killer Ally Farson. The results of this - admittedly small - study, which is also still ongoing, again confirms some of our findings with respect to *Blair Witch*: About one third of the participants in this study are uncertain about the reality status of *Ally Farson* (cf. Schreier & Owzar, 2002).

Hybrid products of the pseudo-documentary type thus do seem to have the potential of leaving about one third of the recipients confused - at least until appropriate genre schemata have been generated.

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