

WRITTEN REASON FOR DECISION SECTION 12

TITLE OF PUBLICATION: The Blair Witch Project

OFLC REF:9902235

HEADNOTE

Type of Publication:	35mm Film
Title of Publication:	The Blair Witch Project
Other known title:	Not Stated
OFLC Publication Reference No:	9902235
Decision:	Objectionable except if the availability of the publication is restricted to persons who have attained the age of 13 years
Display Conditions:	Nil
Descriptive Note:	Contains realistic horror and offensive language

The 35mm film *The Blair Witch Project* is classified as objectionable except if the availability of the publication is restricted to persons who have attained the age of 13 years. The classification is for the strength of the film's frightening content and for the extent of its offensive language.

The Blair Witch Project is a horror story set in contemporary America. It is 81 min 30 sec long. The film starts with the statement: "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."

The material that follows is a 'documentary within a documentary', presented as the experience of these three students, Heather (the director), Joshua (camera) and Mike (sound). The three record themselves on video, 16mm film and DAT audio tape as they investigate the existence of a mythical witch as a documentary project. The witch, according to local legend, haunts the woodlands around the town of Burkittsville, previously called Blair. The film blends the team's videotaped interactions together with their own documentary film footage as they interview locals and tramp into the woods to investigate the scene of one of the witch's 'murders'.

They soon become unsettled by noises in the trees at night and disturbing arrangements of branches, twigs and rocks. Their project turns into a harrowing ordeal captured in 'real time' footage, as they become lost and panic sets in. The story ends in them being terrorised and hunted by an unseen party. They are eventually (by implication) murdered in an old derelict house, in a manner similar to some of the past murders of the legend.

The film is mainly about the characters' fear and their desperate human responses to extreme stress and slow psychological cruelty. *The Blair Witch Project* describes and otherwise deals with matters of horror, cruelty and violence. There are no matters under s3(2) of the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993 (FVPC Act) that are relevant to the classification. In terms of s3(3)(a)(i) of the FVPC Act, the infliction of serious physical harm and acts of significant cruelty are dealt with in several different ways. There are several matter of fact or anecdotal descriptions of cruel murders, and one similar historical description: for example, descriptions of children being killed and men tied up in a bizarre way and disembowelled alive. However the film's more direct situations of cruelty and the infliction of serious physical harm are conveyed through the characters' reactions. The violence and cruelty is mostly implied or suggested. Little actual violence seen by the viewer.

For example, two of them wake up one morning to find Joshua missing, and his desperate calls and screams are heard by them throughout the final part of the film. A bundle of twigs containing some bloody body parts (teeth or entrails – it is not clear what they are but it is heavily implicit that they are Joshua's) is left outside their tent. This is the only part of the film where blood or gore of any description is seen. The killings of the remaining two characters are conveyed by the camera being knocked to the ground and going blank.

The film also contains a considerable amount of offensive language: expletives are used throughout the film as part of the realistic vocabulary of the three students. Mostly the expletives are spoken casually in conversation, but the intensity of the offensive language becomes stronger the more stress the three protagonists are put under. The three students attack one another verbally and physically, in anger and frustration, as the desperation of their predicament mounts. This adds to the emotional impact on the viewer. A lot of the impact of the film is generated by the soundtrack alone: for example, the characters' sobbing and stumbling in the darkness with eerie sounds in the trees around them.

The dominant effect of *The Blair Witch Project* is psychological suspense and horror. The 'real life experience' manner of the story and the simplicity of the story make it plausible and realistic. The strength of horror felt by the viewer will largely depend on the extent to which the viewer believes or is able to believe in the story. In this respect s3(4)(f) of the FVPC Act (other relevant circumstances relating to the intended or likely use of the film) is particularly relevant.

The film has a website that expands on the story of the film. This helps create a convincing illusion that the events of the story are real and actually occurred. For example, it provides 'evidence' from the police's purported investigation into the students' disappearance, such as forensic photographs and recovered diary entries. A more expansive mock documentary showed recently on New Zealand television prior to the theatrical release of the film. This

expands on the backdrop to the story (and therefore the 'hype' of the film), with authentic-looking interviews corroborating events in the story.

It is reasonable to assume that a large part of the audience, particularly adults, will have some exposure to the web-site or some other particular knowledge of the film that will limit the impact of the film. But for other people this other material will lend credibility to the story, make it more likely to be disturbing to them and to create a lasting impression on their minds.

The film is intended for an audience of adults and teenagers. Teenagers in particular are likely to be attracted to the film through its reputation and subject matter, as young people tend to be fascinated by horror stories of a generally similar nature. However, the film is not intended for young children, and would be likely to be very disturbing to them. Children would have difficulty in establishing that it is not 'real'. The fears the film exploits are common to children and frequently upset their development and sense of security: fear of the dark, fear of being lost, fear of the trees, fear of what is outside the tent, etc. In view of these concerns, and the likelihood that some young viewers would be emotionally disturbed by *The Blair Witch Project*, a restriction is necessary.

However, *The Blair Witch Project* also has artistic merit. It is the filmmakers' first feature film and is apparently made on a tiny budget relative to its overseas box office success. It also has some value and importance as a contribution to its genre (it has been recognised at several major overseas film festivals). In view of this, and the fact that the film does not graphically depict violence, any higher restriction on its availability would not be a justified limitation on people's right to freedom of access to information and opinion as protected in s14 of the New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990. The Classification Office is satisfied that a restriction to persons 13 years of age and over is sufficient to minimise the likelihood of any harm arising from the film's availability, such as would arise if it were available to young and impressionable viewers.

The descriptive note is to alert viewers to the level of offensive language in the film, but also to the nature of the horror, which is uncommon and different in manner to the horror of most viewers' film experience.

Written reason for decision is not required for section 12 submissions. It is the policy of the Classification Office to provide written reasons for section 12 submissions.