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Which Witch is Which:

How *The Blair Witch Project* Can Be Compared to Maura Murray's Disappearance

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The Blair Witch Project is one of the most talked-about films in Hollywood's horror film history and because of this fact it has become one of the scariest as well. This film is a fake documentary meant to feel real. The audience sees three teenagers who have gone out into the woods to film a documentary on the Blair Witch, throughout the film. While the teens are out in the woods, the audience can see different shots of the three lost in the woods. These shots can be thought of as foreshadowing to the end of the film. Years after society sees *The Blair Witch Project* be released in theaters, a mysterious investigation of a teen girl named Maura Murray had begun. This investigation of her disappearance brought about a plethora of theories concerning her disappearance. *The Blair Witch Project* can be compared to the disappearance of Maura Murray through the similarities of their countless conspiracy theories that were made up by society, the nature in which society reacted to the two situations, as well as the extensive investigations that took place for the two events.

The Blair Witch Project was such a realistic film that people became confused with the fact that it was actually a fictional story. The documentary style where the actors used handheld cameras to capture their every move is what made this film so realistic. Eduardo Sanchez, the director created a website with many of the props from the film and fake interviews and investigation photographs, making the film seem even more realistic than it already did. Posters were hung that showed pictures of the three teens that said "Missing," across the top of the paper. The film has a story like no other film had before its time.

The film begins with Heather Donahue, Josh Leonard and Mike Williams setting out to their first stop for their documentary, the welcome sign for Burkittsville, Maryland. They went to this spot because Burkittsville was formerly known as Blair, Maryland. Here the audience can see the three goofing around and kissing the slate goodbye as they head off to the general store. The whole film is in documentary style so every "behind the scenes" thing the audience normally would not see, is seen. For example, the audience sees the conversation of the three teens in the car after their first scene at the cemetery. After this scene we see many interviews are done.

The audience then sees many interviews with people talking about what the people who live around the Blair Witch have heard about her. The three then head to their hotel for the night. The next morning they drive to the trail they will start on for their trip to Coffin Rock, their next destination. After they filmed what they needed for that scene of their documentary they headed off to their camp for the night. The next day they hiked to another cemetery to film at which was a full day hike through the woods. At this point the three start to become irritated with one another. Mike yells at Heather about being lost and Josh is the middle man trying to stop the bickering between the two. After they find the second cemetery the three film the last part of their documentary and set up camp for their "last" night in the woods before they travel back to the car to go home. During their supposed last night the three are awoken by weird sounds during the night but find their way back to sleep.

As they start their journey to get back to the car they become lost again. They lose the map and begin bickering again as they try to find their way through the woods. As the day becomes night they are forced to set up camp once again. This night they end up being awoken to the same creepy sounds and Josh goes missing. Mike and Heather are then by themselves as they try to find their way out of the woods when they hear Josh's voice yelling for help. The film ends with Mike and Heather meeting their demise at the abandoned house they found. Many events in history after this film was put out into theaters, can be thought to be similar to or have some of the same conspiracy theories as to what actually happened to these teens.

One event that is thought to be similar to the disappearance of the teens in *The Blair Witch Project*, is the disappearance of Maura Murray. Murray was a teenage girl who was a junior nursing student at The University of Massachusetts. Murray disappeared on the night of February 9, 2004. She was last seen at her crashed car on route 112 in Woodsville, New Hampshire. No one can say for certain where she was headed when she crashed. She knew where she was headed though. The day she disappeared it is shown that she emailed all her professors and her boss, telling them she was taking a week off due to a death in the family. Her family has admitted that no one in the family had died at that time, so she was not telling the truth about that. The reports say that at 7:27pm a call was made by a neighbor who lived around where Maura crashed. The police arrived at the scene at 7:46 and there was no site of her. Maura's disappearance is known as "The first crime mystery of the social media age" (The Kernel). Maura's investigation is still going on today and the true cause of her disappearance is still unknown.

Theories about how Maura Murray disappeared are all over the internet, however there is no actual known reasoning of her disappearance. One theory has been created by the author James Renner in his book, *True Crime Addict: How I Lost Myself in the Mysterious Disappearance of Maura Murray*. James Renner's book talks about the disappearance of Maura and encloses what he believes the real reason for Maura's disappearance was. He writes in his book, "could a child's environment make them good or bad? Were environmental factors, alone, enough to push a kid one way or another?"(14) He has stuck with the idea that Maura ran away and was not killed. His book goes with the idea that Murray's disappearance was not an abduction because there are no traces of it being one and he believes her disappearance was just a runaway. Renner believes that Maura could have been running from the men in her life. These men included her fiance and her Father. In his book Renner continuously shows that he believes everyone is lying and protecting one another with what actually happened to Murray. Throughout his book he gives us *his* opinions on what *he* thinks happened to Maura from what he has investigated and looked into. Although many conspiracists have made up their minds due to his writing because it was so subjective, however we still do not know what truly happened to Murray.

There are some ideas that Maura Murray may have been struggling with a mental disorder at the time because of how she just picked up and left everything, when things seemed to have been going well for her. Oxygen did a series about Murray and her disappearance where they talked and interview many of Maura's family members and bloggers along with two podcasters who joined the show to help find what actually happened to Maura. In this series they retraced all of the known steps Maura took the night she disappeared and still nothing made sense. Is it possible that Murray picked up and disappeared or that she ran away or was abducted.

Is it possible that she was murdered or that she caught a ride with someone who drove past her accident. Are people hiding the truth about where she is or is she really, truly just gone?

The events of *The Blair Witch Project* and the disappearance of Maura Murray have both had many conspiracy theories created from their stories. *The Blair Witch Project* seeming as real as it is has created a place for the fanatics and conspiracists to bring the fictional story alive. I believe Sanchez creating the website he did for the film was the start of a never-ending craze about how society could create these theories about how the Blair Witch really did kill Heather, Josh and Mike out in the woods. The disappearance of Murray has many people scratching their heads about what could have truly happened to her. Society has to ask the question, how, in fourteen years, have we not found anything that has lead us to finding the truth to this mystery? The only thing the investigation has lead society to is wonder and conspiracy. Until society finds answers and the truth, all people have is what they can think up in our minds. What conspiracy theory is right, if any at all. Society finds themselves so caught up in trying to be the hero of an unsolved mystery that it makes the investigator's job that much harder to uncover the actual truth.

Society reacts to whatever is put out into the world especially if it means getting involved in the drama that is created. After *The Blair Witch Project* was released, people went absolutely consumed by the three teens that had been killed in the woods. They were in awe that their documentary tapes were recovered and that a producer had allowed for them to be publicly distributed for all to see. People loved the drama and loved the fact that there was a mysterious element to the film. People wondered how the three died and when this all took place along with where. Society got so invested and caught up in the "truth" of the film, no one could believe that the film was in actuality, fiction. Society struggled with understanding that these three teens were actually just actors and they were not actually dead. The three actors have gotten a lot of backlash from society hating them and wishing they were actually dead because they were so invested in the actuality of the film. With the understanding that the actors were alive it meant they had to be brought into reality that the film in fact, was fiction. However not all disappearances are fiction.

Maura Murray's disappearance has struck society in many of the same ways as the *The Blair Witch Project* has. This is especially after James Renner wrote his book and threw out his ideas of Maura's disappearance. As an influential writer Renner has the ability to get inside people's heads and make his ideas the "best" ideas. We see this same situation going on in the Oxygen series about Maura's disappearance. The Oxygen series on Murray was compiled of family being interview, podcasters aiding in finding the truth about what happened to Murray and Murray's steps being retraced. All of these activities were done in a manner to help investigate and learn what truly happened to the teenage girl. No conclusion was found from filming this oxygen series and looking into her disappearance.

Society could not get over the fact that in *The Blair Witch Project*, the actors are not actually dead, they wanted them to be dead because that is how the film ended. I believe the same thing is happening with Maura's disappearance. Society has gotten themselves so wrapped up in her disappearance that they want their theories about what happened to her to be real. For some this is Maura being dead, for others this is Maura having ran away to create a new life. However since the investigation is still going on today, no one has the true answers as to what happened to Murray and this is frustrating to society. The investigations for *The Blair Witch Project* were very similar.

The investigations for *The Blair Witch Project* were as intense as the investigations that took place for Maura Murray's case. However, they were all artificial and were acted out as a promotion for the film. Sanchez thought this would be the best way to help promote the film as it came out at the film festival in the town. The actors and police figures were to set a sense of realism for the film to feel as real as it was supposed to be. The website is seen to have investigators giving their testimony of what they think happened, even though none of that was real. Again the intensity of the investigation is as high as Murray's case was, but the main difference is that Murray's case was and still is as real as can be and *The Blair Witch Project* investigation was just for the promotion of the film.

The disappearance of Maura Murray can be compared to *The Blair Witch Project* with the similarities of the conspiracy theories, along with societies reaction to the two events and the investigations that took place for each event. The conspiracy theories that have been created by both society and officer personnel are both creative and false. All the theories out for each of these two events have no facts to surround them. As well as the reactions that came from society when they learned *The Blair Witch Project* was artificial. Society was so involved with the idea of *The Blair Witch Project* being real, that they did not know what to do when they found out it is not real. Lastly, the investigations that took place for *The Blair Witch Project* were artificial just as the entire film is, but they made the investigations as real as possible. This fact tied in with the actual reality of the investigations that involved Maura Murray. The similarity of the investigations comes into play with society and how they reacted to them. The disappearance of Maura Murray best aligns with the film, *The Blair Witch Project* because of these facts.

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