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Breaking with Convention: Narrative Structure and Mechanisms of Suspense in *The Blair Witch Project*

การไม่เป็นไปตามขนบ: โครงสร้างเรื่องเล่าและกลไกการสร้างความระทึกใจ ในภาพยนตร์ เรื่อง “โครงการแม่มดแบลร์”

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บทคัดย่อ

โครงสร้างเรื่องเล่าของภาพยนตร์ เรื่อง “โครงการแม่มดแบลร์” (โดย Daniel Myrick และ Eduardo Sanchez, สหรัฐอเมริกา, 1999) ไม่เป็นไปตามจารีตหลักของโครงสร้างภาพยนตร์สยองขวัญหรือฆาตกรรมลึกลับชั้นนำทั่วไป การสร้างความระทึกใจที่เข้มข้น โดยไม่มีภาพลัทธิประหลาดปรากฏให้เห็น เป็นกลวิธีที่ไม่เคยมีใครใช้มาก่อน บทความเรื่องนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ที่จะวิเคราะห์กลไกการสร้างความระทึกใจ เพื่อให้เห็นระบบการเรียงร้อยเรื่องราวและการสร้างความคาดหวังให้เกิดขึ้นกับผู้ชม บทความนี้นำเสนอการเรียงลำดับเหตุการณ์ในภาพยนตร์ ลักษณะสำคัญและการเผยตัวลัทธิประหลาดที่ไม่ปรากฏรูปลักษณ์อย่างชัดเจน รวมถึงความรู้สึกร่วมระหว่างตัวละครเอกกับผู้ชม

คำสำคัญ: โครงสร้างเรื่องเล่า ความระทึกใจ ความสยองขวัญ ลัทธิประหลาด แม่มด

Abstract

The narrative structure of *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, USA, 1999) breaks with the dominant traditions of the classical horror film and mystery thriller by implementing an original form of suspense intensified by an unconventional non-manifestation of the monster. The objective of this article is to probe the film's mechanisms of suspense in order to arrive at new insights into the organization of narrative and the formation of viewer-anticipation. To this end, it explores the film's sequencing of events, the features and disclosure of the ambivalent monster, and the silent bond between the central characters and the viewer.

Keywords: narrative structure, suspense, horror, monster, witch

“This suspense is a thousand times worse than the most horrible event; tell me what new scene of death has been acted, and whose murder I am now to lament?” (Shelley, 1992: 174)
“This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.” (Wilde, 1973: 388)

revealing evidence on videotape. However, they get lost, and after a series of unsettling discoveries they are attacked and die at the hands of an invisible force. This is the quite standard plot of *The Blair Witch Project*. Despite its apparent conformity, the film has seen enormous commercial success, which has been attributed to effective promotion via the Internet rather than well crafted cinematography or an innovative storyline. Many young moviegoers were conjured into assuming the authenticity of the film and mistook fiction for fact.* However, at the center of the analyses presented here lies

Introduction

In 1994, three film students venture into the woods of Burkittsville in Maryland on a quest to explore the myth of the Blair Witch. They document their entire journey with two handheld cameras in hopes of capturing

* The Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia (2007) states: “The release of the film on July 30, 1999 came after months of publicity, including a ground-breaking campaign by the studio to use the Internet and suggest that the film was a real event. It was very positively received and went on to gross over \$248 million worldwide, making it the most profitable independent film ever made up to that point [...] and the most profitable film of all time in terms of ratio of production cost to box office sales.” The hype surrounding the film lasted for several months before it faded. Myrick and Sanchez decided to shoot a sequel, but *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (USA, 2000) was not well received and could never duplicate the success of its predecessor.

the film's resourceful construction of suspense and not the strategy by which it was marketed. A discourse on maintaining suspense is necessary because *The Blair Witch Project* achieves it without ever fully revealing the actual source of evil. This non-manifestation of the monster is an atypical practice for a film that aspires to be shocking and horrific and that takes a witch as its subject matter.

The intention of this article is to explore the film's narrative formation and means of suspense. Therefore, the questions that guide the discussion are the following: What constitutes structures and mechanisms of suspense in general and how are these made manifest in the film? How does the characterization of the antagonist correspond to the formation of suspense? And what is the role of viewer-protagonist identification in regard to these processes?*

Narrative Division and the Question-Answer Set-up

In order to understand the inner workings of a narrative, it should be divided into various

components. Such a dissection should follow previously set rules to yield insightful results. In his excellent study *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, Noël Carroll (1990: 99-103) divides the narrative structure of the classical horror film into four comprehensive phases that center on the conflict between the main characters and an antagonistic power:

Onset, loosely speaking, comprises the scenes and sequences involving the manifestations of the monster, prior to the discovery of the monster. [...] Discovery proper occurs when one character or group of characters comes to the warranted conviction that a monster is at the bottom of the problem. [...] The confirmation function involves the discoverers of or the believers in the existence of the monster convincing some other groups of the existence of the creature and of the proportions of the mortal danger at hand. [...] Humanity marches out to meet its monster and the confrontation

* The last question opens up the possibility to enter a psychoanalytical discourse. However, psychoanalysis often falls short of adequately discussing the various connections between viewers and characters. This has also been pointed out by Murray Smith (1995: 5), who states that "the use of psychoanalysis has often led to descriptive inaccuracies and explanatory simplifications in the discussion of both the form and rhetoric of films, and the way in which spectators engage with such form." Therefore, this article opts to take a structural rather than a psychoanalytical approach to viewers, characters, and suspense.

generally takes the form of a debacle. Often, there is more than one confrontation. These may assume the shape of an escalation in intensity or complexity or both. [...] In the majority of cases, humanity emerges victorious from its confrontation with the monster, though it is possible for us to lose [...].

This division into onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation is not the only legitimate entry to a discourse on the narrative formation of horror films, but it is a sound starting point due to its universality and depth. This categorization is made with the traditional horror film in mind, yet it also provides a valuable device for the analysis of the less conventional *The Blair Witch Project* as it brings to light this film's intriguing departure from the mainstream horror plot and reveals the abstract features that lie at the core of suspense mechanisms.

1. Louis Giannetti (1996: 326) states: "The opening expository scenes [...] establish

the internal 'world' of the story - what's possible, what's probable, what's not very likely, and so on." True to this statement, the onset phase opens with a prolog: "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." It covers the first two days and introduces the witch hunters Heather, Mike, and Josh in private spaces, establishes the myth surrounding their disappearance and the legend of the Blair Witch, and builds anticipation for the uncanny events to come. It includes a documentary sequence shot at the cemetery of Burkittsville as well as the students' interviews with the townspeople. Not only do they offer testimony to the presumed existence of the witch, Irit also do statements also vaguely foreshadow the manner by which the students will eventually die. The segment concludes with the protagonists' journey into the forest.* Note that the monster is not made manifest, but from a suspense point-of-view this is not necessary as the phase makes the myth of the

* The prolog suggests that *The Blair Witch Project* is shown from the point-of-view of three dead people. It thus taps into the popular fascination for stories told by a deceased narrator. This approach has become popular through Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (USA, 1950), which starts with the death of the main protagonist and is then told as a flashback until the moment of death is reached again and the plot has run its full circle. Many well-known films, notably *American Beauty* (USA, 1999) by Sam Mendes, have borrowed and developed this idea.

witch - rather than the witch itself - the center of the film's "internal world".

2. Josh's claim to have heard strange noises at night initiates the discovery phase, which is subsequently set in place when deep in the forest the protagonists come upon heaps of bundled rocks, suggesting a mysterious and eerie presence. The nightly noises grow more disturbing and the darkness more threatening, and soon the students lose their bearings. Thus, the discovery phase serves to establish a first sense of insecurity and the presence of an unknown and possibly supernatural power, the proof of which is not sufficient yet. But the seed of doubt for a rational explanation has been solidly planted by this and the previous phase.

3. The discovery phase merges with the confirmation phase, which starts with the discovery of more heaps of rocks placed in front of the tent, together with wooden crosses and stick-figures the protagonists find in the forest. This gives rise to the assertion that they have ventured into the realm of an antagonistic force

and that a confrontation is imminent. They try to keep their spirits up, yet at this point they are convinced that something wicked is hunting them. The convergence of the second and third phase marks a successful departure from Carroll's system because it does not violate viewer expectations.*

4. During the following night the confrontation phase begins when the protagonists are awakened by an unseen attacker shaking their tent. Struck by panic and fear they flee into the night. This event constitutes the first climax, and the subsequent narrative is marked by a constant rise of tension. After days of unrest Josh disappears, and Heather and Mike are terrorized by his tortured screams in the distance and are soon lured into a haunted house and slain. The force and brevity of the attack is surprising as in most common horror narratives the confrontation phase is made elaborate for the pleasure of the viewer. Also astonishing is the lack of defense by the protagonists. *The Blair Witch Project* is an odd example of

* In fact, it may be associated with the classical paradigm discussed by Syd Field (Giannetti 1996: 329), who divides narrative structure into "setup (25%), confrontation (50%), and resolution (25%)", and therefore links the second and third phase suggested by Carroll.

a horror film in which the good forces do not prevail.*

Carroll (1990: 131) comments on the fundamental structure of narrative and offers a refined variation of the common cause/effect and action/reaction set-ups, which are applicable to virtually any narrative text: “[T]he basic narrative connective — the rhetorical bond between plot movements — in the horror story (as in other popular narratives) is the question/answer format.” Carroll (1990: 136) then declares that “macro-questions” and “micro-questions” are the basis of this structure. These are questions dealing with an all-encompassing conflict and the details feeding it. Hence, a film narrative as a whole and each phase of its own accord must pose questions that allow multiple answers so as to direct the plot, to stimulate viewer anticipation and imagination, and to sustain suspense.

At this point the applicability of the proposed interrogative scheme to *The Blair Witch Project* will be examined. Thus, which questions does the film pose and what

answers does it offer? Some of the micro-questions include: What happened to the protagonists’ map? Will they be attacked again? Will they find more mysterious signs? What and to whom are these signs communicating? Questions such as these easily arrive at and are answered within a short period of time in order to keep the narrative flow steady and the spectator involved.

The micro-questions shape minor events and support six essential macro-questions. Two of these more central issues that drive the narrative forward are raised in the course of the onset phase to create concern for the fate of the protagonists: What happened to the film students? What does the film material reveal? During the same phase, two more macro-questions are put forward based on the subsequent interviews and documentary sequences. Does the witch exist? If she does, what does she look like? The discovery and confirmation phase serve to introduce two more crucial problems. Will there be a face-off between the protagonists and the witch? Is

* Despite its effectiveness and universal relevance, the narrative division introduced above is limiting in scope when utilized independently and needs support by further investigation. As alternatives to Carroll’s narrative division, see prominent contributions to the analysis of dramatic structure by Gustav Freytag: *Freytag’s Technique of Drama*, as well as Syd Field’s *The Definite Guide to Screenwriting*. Both authors are commonly referred to in discourses on dramatic structure in film, literature, and theater. Due to spatial limitations this article cannot discuss these authors’ theories in depth.

such a conflict indeed the reason for their mysterious disappearance? These major questions are concerned with the physical and mental state of the protagonists, the myth of the witch, and the evolving conflict. Their equal distribution is noteworthy as it provides a sense of balance to the narrative and guides viewer expectations. Moreover, by means of sequencing the questions the intensity of suspense is gradually increased, and the possibility of opposing outcomes inherent in the form of each question results in anticipation and suspense.

The film gives conclusive answers to the first, second, and last questions: The students lost their way in the woods and were killed; the film footage is the evidence to this; and the conflict leads to the students' death. The other questions remain partially or fully unsolved: The viewer has no certainty of the existence of the witch because an ultimate revelation does not occur; and there is a physical attack on the students, but the aggressor remains unknown. As has been noted in the discussion of the confrontation phase, the inconclusive ending is a rare practice in a traditional film narrative. It keeps the myth of the monster alive, but it is often a source of disappointment and frustration for the viewer.

In *The Blair Witch Project*, the action rises to a clash between good and evil powers

and to the major concern: Will humanity seize the day or will evil prevail? The latter is the case, and, based on the film's prolog, the protagonists' virtues cannot save them. They are unable to escape their doom, which is a diversion from the rules of the classical horror plot, in which suspense is created by offering the victims ways of resistance to increase their chances of survival. When the good forces seem to be losing the fight against evil, it goes against the human sense of justice and the hope that humanity will prevail in the face of destruction.

In general, there appears to be a plausible link between the lack of suspense and the failure of the good forces to succeed against the enemy, as Carroll (1990: 139) contends: "Suspense does not seem to take hold in fiction — whether cinematic, theatrical, or literary — where the moral outcome appears likely or the evil outcome doomed." Nevertheless, the narrative of *The Blair Witch Project* does not adhere to this assertion as the death of the students is certain. The intensity of suspense stays high and reaches an emotional climax when Heather is sure of her impending demise, holds the camera in a close-up, and makes a tearful farewell speech. Through this closeness to the face, the camera lays bare the vulnerability of the human condition. As the students accept their doom, the

spectator's belief in their salvation falters. Despite the final victory of evil and the resolution of the fate of the protagonists, the concluding climax does not offer a complete unraveling of the plot, and uncertainty concerning the existence of the witch remains, which supports the myth and the viewer's sense of tension beyond the ending of the film. This illustrates that an ultimate discovery in the form of a visual revelation of the monster is not necessary to achieve suspense if the question/answer format is consistent.

Manifestations of Evil and Viewer-Protagonist Identification

In *The Blair Witch Project*, evil forces are used to advantage in inducing viewer anticipation. Adhering to the appearance of many antagonists, such as vampires or zombies, the witch shows a range of traditional qualities. Barbara Creed (1993: 76) comments on the witch's lowliness and

ambiguity in popular perception:

The witch sets out to unsettle boundaries between the rational and irrational, symbolic and imaginary. Her evil powers are seen as part of her 'feminine' nature; she is closer to nature than man and can control forces in nature such as tempests, hurricanes and storms. [...] Irrational, scheming evil — these are the words used to define the witch. The witch is also associated with a range of abject things: filth, decay, bats, spiders, cobwebs, brews, potions and even cannibalism.*

In other words, the witch has superhuman powers which she employs to malicious ends, her motivation being the linkage of the normal with the abnormal. She is man's embodied fear of nature's unpredictability and she must be perceived as unclean and unclassifiable in order to be denied human qualities.

* Furthermore, Carroll (1990: 32-33) puts emphasis on the impurity of the monster: "[A]n object or being is impure if it is categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless. [...] Indeed, the frequent resort to referring to monsters by means of pronouns like "It" and "Them" suggests that these creatures are not classifiable according to our standing categories. [...] Horrific monsters often involve the mixture of what is normally distinct." This impurity is based on the perceived dualism of cinematic beings including androids, clones, cyborgs, animated machines, and vampires. Familiar examples of such unnatural and threatening unions are Hel/Maria in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (Germany, 1927), Henry in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (USA, 1931), the replicants in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (USA, 1982), and the robot in James Cameron's *The Terminator* (USA, 1984).

The monster of the classical horror film is not only menacing and lethal but also unclean and repulsive. The interviewed townspeople associate the witch with uncanny locations of decay and impurity such as the local cemetery near the edge of the forest. According to the fabricated legend in the film, the Blair Witch is invisible yet active, neither man nor woman, neither dead nor alive. Despite her non-manifestation, the witch remains within the framework of common understanding, as she demonstrates her cruelty by terrorizing the students for days before her strikes become deadly. She is associated with disgust as on the morning of the sixth day the students find their camp in disorder and Josh's backpack covered with slime, which marks him as her first victim. As a result, the fear of the protagonists and the repulsion of the spectator are enforced because the adversary is unclassifiable and seemingly dual in nature.*

This leads to another vital point of interest: What is the role of the forest of Burkittsville? Just like the witch, the forest reveals all the qualities of menacing fusion. Its ground is muddy and hence unclean, and its appearance disturbing and without gender. It generates heaps of rocks and wooden crosses, suggesting that it is a multiple presence that has come to life. It is presented as the witch's realm of darkness into which the protagonists have trespassed. With their map thrown away and their compass malfunctioning, the students venture deep into the labyrinth and move toward their death. The idyll becomes an oppressive waste land in the expressionistic tradition. The gnarled trees look like tentacles and the branches like crooked fingers reaching out to grab their victims. It seems that the forest does not only do the witch's work, it *becomes* the witch. During the

* This duality may be read as a metaphor for the human struggle to come to terms with the inner separation of reality and wish. Georg Seesslen (Aurich, 2000: 9) has summarized this fascination with duality: "Man is no being that is one. The individual, undivided, is his dream, not his reality. He sees himself as split, continuously divided, and removed from himself. Here, he breaks up into body, soul, and spirit, there, into gaze and image; here, he is the object of desire, there, the subject of love; here he is what he seems to be, there, what he wants from himself. He is man and woman, history and nature; he is the being that needs image, mask, and mirror. All his reverie, his storytelling, his creating have only two points of departure, the miracle of unity and the horror of never-ending division. This is why his world is populated by heroes, demons, and gods, by shadows and *doppelgänger*s; this is why he is constantly searching for his counterpart - only in order to find himself."

day it is quiet and peaceful, but it awakes at night to do its mischief and to prepare the prey for the final slaying at its center point.*

The protagonists are helplessly exposed to the wicked forces and the viewer sympathizes with their fate. Within the framework of the bond between viewers and protagonists, the significance of identification processes must not be underestimated as a vital component of any engaging narrative. A film builds suspense by first establishing the point-of-view and then encouraging the viewer's identification with the characters.** This is achieved through a realistic depiction of the events. The more a film manages to activate the spectator's involvement, the more suspense will be felt. This is a noticeable intention of *The Blair Witch Project*. The suspense curve takes a sharp upturn each time the protagonists are confronted with

seemingly supernatural powers and the fear reaches its climax. Furthermore, the spectator is led to sympathize with the protagonists as they are rendered congenial during the onset phase, and later helpless in the face of terror and destruction. Their display of vulnerability is only too human, and the viewer witnesses how the inner work of group dynamics takes them to the verge of breakup.***

Jill Nelmes (2003: 458) defines identification as follows:

The process of identification allows us to place ourselves in the position of particular characters, either throughout or at specific moments in a movie. The devices involved include subjectivity of viewpoint (we see the world through their eyes and a shared knowledge; we know what and only what they

* The house in which Heather and Mike are murdered is the ultimate location of horror and stands in contrast to the personal environments in which the protagonists are introduced and the tent into which they frequently withdraw to seek shelter. The gradual movement from space of innocence to space of destruction lends a dynamic aspect to the narrative and creates viewer anticipation and suspense.

** In his cognitive anthropology on the connections between characters and spectators, Smith (1995: 5) employs the terms "distinct levels of engagement" and "the structure of sympathy" as alternatives to the more general 'identification' and 'point-of-view'. Nevertheless, the latter two terms are equally valid and widely used.

*** The film employs a triangular character formation in order to create friction and imbalance. The protagonists quarrel much and tensions among them arise. Heather's arrogance, Josh's fierceness, and Mike's impulsiveness provoke arguments and a drift. The group dynamic is partially responsible for their inability to escape and it creates suspense-driven micro-questions. For example, Will the group fall apart?

know) and a sharing in their moral world, largely through narrative construction.

Thus, identity is based on common perspectives and shared ethics. *The Blair Witch Project* does not build identity around mutual values because the depth of character is not what the audience of horror films usually seeks. The film emphasizes a common perspective by a specific use of the cameras instead. The fact that the students usually keep their two handheld cameras turned on allows smooth cuts and transitions without breaks in continuity. This utilization of the camera as a subjective agent constitutes a further basis for the construction of viewer identification, and it is an approach reminiscent of the actuality-driven *cinéma vérité*, i.e. in the tradition of the subjective camera, the lens substitutes for the protagonists' eyes and lets the viewer experience everything from their points-of-view. The objective is to create a quasi-documentary and a reliving of their quest, to generate compassion for the main characters, and, in consequence, to toy with the spectator's fear for their security. It should be

noted that *The Blair Witch Project* may be the first horror film that employs the subjective camera with systematic consistency, and it constitutes one of the few instances where this approach succeeds in its goal to create and sustain viewer engagement and suspense.*

Edward Branigan (1992: 74-75) contends that there is an intimate connection between the distribution of knowledge and the type of narrative. He states that a

[...] way to measure relative knowledge is to evaluate whether the spectator knows more than ($>$), the same as ($=$), or less than ($<$) a particular character at a particular time. [This shows] how the spectator is being asked to respond to a given narrative situation. Knowledge is linked to response as follows: $S > C$ suspense, $S = C$ mystery, $S < C$ surprise.

Therefore, suspense, mystery, and surprise are three likely results of knowledge distributed among the protagonists and the viewers. Surprise does not occur in *The Blair Witch Project*, only shock does when the protagonists are slain. More importantly, the

* Robert Montgomery's *The Lady in the Lake* (USA, 1947) is the first known film to have used the subjective camera extensively to create viewer identification with the main protagonist. While *The Blair Witch Project* succeeds at using the subjective camera because it disguises fiction as a document of truth, *The Lady in the Lake* falls short of being convincing because of the technical challenges to the consistent use of the subjective camera and because this attempt at realism clashes with the film's fictitious content.

use of the subjective camera has a vital impact on the allocation of knowledge, which necessarily influences viewer-protagonist identification as well as suspense. The film mostly employs the second possibility suggested by Branigan as the use of the subjective camera leads to a shared point-of-view, which then results in an equally limited distribution of knowledge. Moreover, this source of mystery is enforced by the non-appearance of the witch and it solidifies the myth of her existence.

Nevertheless, the viewer has an information advantage due to the prolog, and unlike the protagonists, one can foresee that the quest will lead to their demise. As a consequence, the spectator experiences an inner struggle with regard to the impossibility of active intervention and the sharing of the superior knowledge. The vain hope that the positive and unlikely outcome will take place is a major source of suspense here. Furthermore, unlike the viewer, the protagonists do not have time to indulge in suspense; feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and terror are more probable. The viewer, on the other hand, experiences the filmic events on an emotional level. In the secure darkness of the cinema, the privileged audience feels safe and is allowed to anticipate and to revel in the pleasure of suspense. One identifies with the protagonists but one does

not empathize with them.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to scrutinize the narrative structure of *The Blair Witch Project* and the means by which it builds and sustains suspense. The popular division into the phases of onset, discovery, confirmation, and confrontation has been employed, and it has been shown that micro- and macro-questions keep the spectator involved and drive the narrative forward. However, only the major questions concerning the fate of the protagonists are fully answered while the questions dealing with the existence and appearance of the witch are not. This results in further consolidation of the myth surrounding the witch's existence and does not necessarily frustrate the viewer.

The protagonists are subjected to mental and physical pain inflicted by antagonistic and invisible forces, which are the uncanny environment of the forest and what must be assumed to be the witch. These forces act as a unit and reveal their authority through their dual nature. They adhere to popular perceptions of monsters being unclean, without clear gender, and powerful beyond human capability and comprehension.

Although the film aspires to be thrilling and horrific by strongly hinting at the source

of evil, it actually never exposes it. This approach to the construction of suspense presents a deviation from the one seen in mainstream horror films as it breaks with many traditional concepts. For example, the film highlights the fact that the protagonists have no true chance of withstanding the onslaughts.*

The film establishes a bond between viewers and protagonists by the use of the subjective camera, the depiction of a natural setting, and the drawing of the protagonists as pleasant yet vulnerable. The subjective camera in particular is responsible for a shared point-of-view and for a reality-like presentation of the story.

Based on the prolog the spectator is lead to believe that the conclusion will be unfavorable for the protagonists. This assumption is a key source of suspense as it works against the human sense of justice. However, while the protagonists feel terror and fear, the viewer sits in the safe space of the cinema and may indulge in the joy of suspense.

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* Therefore, the genre specification of *The Blair Witch Project* poses a bit of a dilemma. An emphasis on the protagonists’ terror or the spectator’s pleasure in suspense may lead to the misconception that it is a classical horror film. However, since the film stimulates sympathy for the protagonists, does not resolve the questions concerning the existence of the monster, and works with suggestions and allusions, it should be considered a horror film with elements of the fantastic.

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