# "Please Help Me; All I Want to Know Is: Is It Real or Not?": How Recipients View the Reality Status of *The Blair Witch Project*

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**Abstract** This article is concerned with how recipients evaluate the reality status of media products, how they distinguish and how they interrelate elements of "fact" and "fiction." On the basis of an overview of recent theories of fictionality, an approach comprising three independent perspectives for evaluating the reality status of media products is proposed: a pragmatic perspective concerning the product type ("fact," "fiction," and "hybrids"), a semantic perspective concerning product content (degrees of plausibility), and a perspective of mode referring to the (perceived) realism of the product (formal features and their effects on degree of involvement). Under all three perspectives, a media product will usually contain cues that orient the recipient toward ontic status, plausibility of content, and so forth. This model is then applied to a media product transcending the traditional boundaries between "fact" and "fiction," the pseudodocumentary horror film *The Blair Witch Project* and its reception. To study the reception, a random sample of e-mails from Internet newsgroup discussions of the film is subjected to content analysis. A first analysis shows that among those e-mails written within six months after the release of the film, 38 percent refer to questions concerning its reality status. A second analysis explores the perspectives from which this reality status is discussed and whether the recipients regard the film as fiction or as nonfiction. While most discussants correctly identify it as fiction, almost 40 percent are at least temporarily uncertain as to the product type. To substantiate their

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perceptions of or their doubts concerning the film's ontic status, both recipients that consider it to be fiction and recipients who are uncertain frequently refer to information gathered from other media. By comparison, cues that permit the unambiguous identification of the film as fiction (impossible content elements, disclaimer as part of the credits) are only rarely given as reasons. These results show that novel, unfamiliar hybrid genres have the potential to confuse recipients and thus temporarily provide a way for "fiction" to enter "life."

## 1. Introduction

In the summer of 1999, yet another low-budget horror film, *The Blair Witch Project*, was released, telling the story of the disappearance of three film students who had supposedly fallen victim to the notorious Blair Witch (for the plot, see section 3.1 below). Even though the directors and the actors had been virtually unknown to the public, this low-budget production turned out a surprise hit at the box office, bringing in a profit of well over $100 million (Nash 2003). Nor did the fans' enthusiasm remain limited to the cinema surroundings: Shortly after the film's release, the inhabitants of the small American town of Burkittsville, the production site, began to encounter groups of moviegoers who had set up their own search parties looking for the three students or even for the Blair Witch herself (Breznigan 2001).

It will be assumed here that this fascination with the film is in large part inspired by its Internet marketing strategy, suggesting (somewhat in the tradition of the "mock-documentary" [Roscoe and Hight 2001]) that this entirely fictional horror film is in fact of a documentary nature. The film plays upon the expectations of the recipients, tempting some into wondering for a brief moment "What if it were true?" and potentially confusing others into taking the fiction to be fact and acting upon this mistaken conviction (for details, see section 3 below).

By thus situating itself on the borderline between fact and fiction, however, the film also sharpens our awareness of how we usually distinguish between the two modalities and of how we interconnect them, thus allowing for "fiction" to enter "life."[1] This fact/fiction issue has engendered a number of different positions in both literary theory and reception studies, from a theoretical as well as from an empirical point of view. Literary theory has often been concerned with defining "fiction" in sharp opposition to "fact," thus presupposing that the two are conceptually distinct (for details, see

1. While in the past fiction usually came in the form of print on the page, today fiction may equally take the form of a film, an audioplay, a computer game, or a MUD (multiuser domain) on the Internet. In order to take these changes into account, the term *fiction* will here be used to comprise all its manifestations, regardless of the medium in which they occur; likewise, the term *text* will be used to refer to all types of media products.

section 2.1 below).[2] At the same time, there have always been attempts in literary theory to relate the two: works of fiction have been accorded a "higher truth" (Barsch 1998), a number of real-life functions have been ascribed to them (Pavel 2000; Wild 1982), in particular a moral and educational function, to which, for instance, the Bildungsroman attests. Reception studies have usually been based on the normative assumption that recipients ought to be able to draw a clear distinction between fact and fiction (see the overview in Rothmund et al. 2001a). Where this was not the case, instances of fiction entering life have often been regarded as manifestations of a deficit in the recipients' media competence (for instance, Buckingham 1993; Gadow et al. 1988).

Yet over the course of time reception studies have yielded ample evidence against this latter view. For literature and fiction enter the lives not only of the exceptionally incompetent, but also of perfectly normal individuals with perfectly average media skills. Repeated exposure to violent film material leads to an increase in aggressive behavior, at least in individuals predisposed to regard violence as pleasurable (Paik and Comstock 1994; van der Voort and Beentjes 1997). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that readers are willing to accept even blatantly false information as "factual"—at least in the short run—when it is presented as part of the background of a fictional narrative (see Prentice and Gerrig 1999; Gerrig and Rapp in this volume). Recipients relate what they read and view to their everyday lives, be it "high literature" (for instance, Pette 2001) or an afternoon soap (for instance, Ang 1990). They frequently identify with fictional worlds and characters within those worlds (for instance, Andringa in this volume), and sometimes they even form "parasocial relationships" with those characters (Gleich 1997; Vorderer and Knobloch 2000). Relating "fact" and "fiction" is thus a perfectly ordinary part of the reception process—although few will go so far as those recipients of *The Blair Witch Project* who actually confused the two by forming search parties for the fictional characters who had gone missing.

It will be argued here that these theoretical positions and empirical results, pointing to a clear divide between fact and fiction, on the one hand, and numerous interrelations between them, on the other, are not in fact contradictory. Instead, these views can be regarded as manifestations of different perspectives on the relation between the two. In what follows, a brief overview of definitions of fiction in literary theory will first be provided (2.1); these definitions will then be integrated into a three-perspective model

2. Attempts have also been made to transcend this prevalent dichotomy. In particular, Iser (1993) thus introduces the category of the imaginary, and Eco (1994) assumes that fiction is necessarily based upon fact and so always contains factual elements.

for conceptualizing the interrelation between fact and fiction (2.2 and 2.3). Next, the model will be applied to the hybrid case of *The Blair Witch Project*. Following a summary analysis of the film from the three perspectives (3.1), the results of a content analysis of Internet newsgroup discussions of the film will be presented, demonstrating in what ways recipients relate and sometimes confuse fact and fiction when confronted with such a complex media product (3.2 and 3.3).

## 2. The Theory: Conceptualizing Fact and Fiction

### *2.1. Fiction in Literary Theory*

Recent discussions in literary studies (since the late 1950s) point to three broad traditions of conceptualizing fiction, which will here be termed representational, semantic, and pragmatic approaches (see the overview in Nickel-Bacon et al. 2000).

Representational approaches aim at defining fiction by recourse to formal textual elements (and nothing but such formal elements). Such textual elements comprise, for instance, the epical form of the imperfect tense (Hamburger 1993 [1968]), verbs describing internal processes (ibid.), or the specifically literary or poetic quality of the language (Petersen 1995; Schlaffer 1990). The assumption that these elements are more frequently part of fictional than of nonfictional texts does indeed appear to be justified. When it comes to unambiguously defining fiction, however, such formal textual characteristics are neither necessary nor sufficient: the entire range of fiction meant for "easy reading" (romance, mystery, horror, etc.), for instance, deliberately employs everyday rather than poetic language (for details, see Nickel-Bacon et al. 2000: 273ff.). Language in literature and fiction is thus more appropriately conceptualized as a "world of transitions" (Anderegg 1983: 172), manifesting devices that range from the ordinary to the elaborately poetic. While the presence of poetic language can indeed count as an "orienting signal" (in the terminology of Weinrich 1975: 526), pointing the readers toward the fictional status of the text, the lack of such aesthetic devices is not to be interpreted as signaling factuality. Another representational approach consists in tying fictionality to the difference between author and narrator (Cohn 1990; Stierle 1975). Again, this criterion is not necessarily present in all fictional texts. More importantly, however, this is a criterion that ultimately defies a purely formal definition: determining the relation between author and narrator requires information about the author and about the context of production, which goes beyond the text itself. This criterion is thus, at least in part, a pragmatic one (see below).

Semantic approaches likewise attempt to provide an unambiguous defi-

nition of fiction and in doing so are subject to similar objections. Here, signals orienting the reader toward the fictional character of the text are supposed to lie in the content. Fictional texts are conceptualized as a form of an "as if" discourse; the entities (persons, places, and the like) mentioned in the text do not have an equivalent outside the fictional world (e.g., Gabriel 1975; Thürnau 1994; on the ontic status of entities in fiction see Pavel 1986: chap. 2). Oliver Twist, the Artful Dodger, or Charley Bates in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* have no existence outside these novels; these characters are fictitious,[3] "empty labels" (Thürnau 1994). The London that Dickens portrays, its poverty and squalor, on the other hand, do exist in "real life"[4]—fictional texts thus also comprise elements that do refer to the real world (cf. Eco 1994; Genette 1988). In addition, fictitious content can also be part of nonfictional texts (arithmetic tasks, etc.; on which, see Barsch 1998).

Thus, fictitious elements are likewise signals that orient the reader toward the fictional character of a text, but they do not do so unambiguously and cannot therefore be considered sufficient for defining fictionality. Rather, the distinction between fact and fiction appears to be tied to the communicative context, requiring a pragmatic approach, where acts of fictionalization (in both production and reception) are conceptualized as convention-driven communicative types of action (for instance, Eco 1994; Hoops 1979; Iser 1993; Landwehr 1975). An early yet comprehensive conceptualization is provided by Siegfried J. Schmidt's (1972, 1980) distinction between a literary-aesthetic and an everyday system of communication, either subject to its own conventions. Within the everyday communicative system, the "fact convention" applies, whereby every statement is to be judged by the criteria of truth and utility. Within the literary-aesthetic system, the fact convention is suspended and replaced by a convention that entails other criteria, such as aesthetic pleasure, degree of interest, novelty, and so forth.

This pragmatic approach constitutes a radical departure from the representational and semantic alternatives, which postulate characteristics that distinguish fictional from nonfictional texts and thus consider fictionality a property of the text. According to the pragmatic approach, fictionality is no longer regarded as a quality residing *in* the text, but a quality ascribed *to* the text as the result of operations of fictionalization carried

3. The term *fictitious* is used to refer to textual elements on the content level that have no correspondent in the real world, regardless of the product type. Fictitious elements can thus occur in fictional and nonfictional texts alike.

4. The term *real life* has been adopted from perceived reality research in media psychology (for instance, Wright et al. 1994). Its placement in inverted commas is meant to indicate that its use does not imply any ontological assumptions (see Schulz 1989).

out in accordance with the aesthetic convention.[5] To the extent that this convention can be assumed to encompass all participants in the literary-aesthetic system of communication, such operations of fictionalization are carried out by both the authors/producers of fictional texts (Iser 1993) and their recipients (Rusch 1997).[6] To the extent that authors/producers intend recipients to read a text as fiction, they will include in the text cues to its fictional status, such as have been identified within representational and semantic approaches to be characteristic of fiction. But these now count as reading instructions which permit the recipients to locate the text within the literary-aesthetic system of communication in the manner intended by the author (Schmidt 1972: 63). If recipients do indeed recognize these instructions and act accordingly, they can be said to read the text in a "cointentional" manner (Landwehr 1975; Eco [1994: 103] refers to the "fictional contract"). It is obvious that on this basis there can be no defining characteristics of fiction. Authors/producers may fail to provide clear instructions to the recipients, resulting in the reception of these fictional texts as nonfiction. Likewise, recipients are at liberty to read a nonfictional text as they would ordinarily read a fictional one (e.g., for the aesthetic pleasure it gives them) and vice versa.

It is at this point that the interrelation between the pragmatic approaches to fictionality, on the one hand, and the formal-representational and semantic approaches, on the other, emerges. Formal or semantic characteristics of the text (such as poeticity or elements lacking a reference to the external world, respectively) become "orienting signals" and as such part of the instructional semantics of fictional texts. This instructional semantics in turn constitutes a necessary requirement for readers to understand and reconstruct the text in a cointentional manner as fiction. Eco (1994: chap. 6), however, stresses that these orienting signals are by no means unambiguous: They may but need not indicate the text's fictionality. According to Eco, only paratextual cues, such as title, introductory formulae, and so forth, permit the reader to unambiguously locate the text within the literary-aesthetic system of communicative actions, as an instance of the product type fiction.[7]

In literary studies, sociohistoric factors thus play an increasing role in

5. The pragmatic approach applies to nonfiction as well, factuality being correspondingly regarded not as a textual property, but as a quality assigned to texts on the basis of operations of factualization according to the fact convention.

6. Strictly speaking, the term *fictional texts* does not fit this pragmatic context. *Texts intended by their authors to be read as fiction*, however, is a rather clumsy term. I will therefore continue to use the term *fictional texts* as shorthand for it.

7. Strictly speaking, paratextual signals are not unambiguous either—as when a novel is announced as an "autobiography" in the subtitle, albeit a fictional one.

distinctions between fact and fiction. To the extent that this distinction is sociohistorically based, however, it is also relative and variable. It further emerges that the reception of the texts as fiction or nonfiction is guided by three types of orienting signals: paratextual, semantic, and formal cues. Of these, the paratextual signals function as a kind of frame and are thus, in the ordinary course of reception, prior to the other two types.

Incidentally, a similar movement from a "realistic" to a "pragmatic" position can be found in "perceived reality" research, an area of reception studies that focuses on the development of the distinction between fact and fiction in children (for an overview, see Busselle and Greenberg 2000; Rothmund et al. 2001a). Here, too, it was originally assumed that realism (as a formal characteristic) and plausibility (as a semantic characteristic) constitute invariable properties of media products. In the course of research, this position has increasingly been replaced by a pragmatic one, conceptualizing the distinction between fact and fiction as the recipient's evaluation of the modality status of a media product. This evaluation is based both on the recipient's own world and media knowledge and on cues (criteria, in the terminology of perceived reality research) forming part of the media product. It is further contended that there not only exist signals pointing the recipient toward the fictionality of media products; the existence of complementary cues indicating factuality (such as genre information, probable content elements) also is assumed.[8]

Despite its sociohistoric variability, however, the relevance of the distinction between fact and fiction has remained undisputed. This is largely because of the fact convention obtaining in an everyday context: when acting and interacting in the world, we constantly rely on information gained from others or via the media. The validity of this information is essential: If I hear and (mistakenly) believe that mental illness is contagious (see the article by Richard J. Gerrig and David N. Rapp in this volume), this will change the way I act when I next encounter a mentally ill person. And if I hear in *The Blair Witch Project* about the existence of witches and their wicked deeds and mistake this film for the truth, and if I then set out to find the Blair Witch for myself, this will at best cost me quite a bit of time and money and at worst lead to the death of an innocent person whom I mistakenly identify as the "Blair Witch." Of course, examples of misguided recipients of fictional media products who failed to distinguish between fact and fiction abound, ranging from those who succumbed to the "Werther syndrome" to children and youths such as Robert Steinhäuser, who, in imi-

8. This is actually in accordance with Weinrich's (1975) original conceptualization of "orienting signals." For obvious reasons, however, work in literary studies has concentrated on signals orienting the reader toward the fictional rather than the factual status of texts.

tation of the "story lines" provided by present-day violent computer games, such as *Counterstrike*, in April 2002 killed seventeen persons at the Gutenberg Gymnasium in Erfurt.[9] Thus, where the fact convention obtains, what one hears and reads in a nonfiction product will, for the most part and to the best of the author's/producer's knowledge, constitute valid information about the world, which one can safely act upon.[10] A fiction product, on the other hand, might also contain such information, but it need not; and if it does not, the author/producer cannot be held responsible for any damage that might have ensued from someone mistaking the invalid for valid information and acting accordingly.[11]

### *2.2. Three Perspectives on Distinguishing between Fact and Fiction*

In the present conceptualization, I assume that the three approaches to fiction found in literary studies and (to a large extent) also in perceived reality research constitute three perspectives from which an evaluation of the reality status of a media product can take place: a pragmatic perspective, a semantic perspective, and a perspective of mode (see Nickel-Bacon et al. 2000; Rothmund et al. 2001b; Schreier et al. 2001; see Figure 1).[12]

The approach builds upon the three types of "orienting signals" distinguished in literary theories of fictionality. But it also differs from the majority of these theories in two respects: first, evaluations under the three perspectives are regarded as mutually independent. Unlikely plot elements, for instance, affect the overall plausibility of the plot but do not necessarily

9. This is not to imply that the frequent playing of such violent computer games is the sole cause of Steinhäuser's crime; obviously, it is only one factor among many (on the debate surrounding media violence and the danger of imitation by children in particular, see Groebel 2001).

10. It will do so only for the most part, since conventions do or do not obtain at the social macrolevel. Whether the individual author or reader at the microlevel follows or flouts the convention is a different question entirely. Also, authors who fully intend to follow the convention may be in error. There is thus no guarantee that the information obtained from a nonfiction product will in fact be valid.

11. This raises questions as to what extent we can actually know anything about the external world and to what extent media products can be expected to provide information about the world. Recently, such questions (which do of course look back upon a long philosophical tradition) have been discussed in the context of constructivist approaches. The assumptions concerning the conventions and fiction as well as nonfiction products detailed in this article are based on the position of cognitive constructivism (cf. Neisser 1967): "reality" is here considered to be observer-dependent (ontological position)—without, however, rejecting the notion of criteria for evaluating statements about this "reality" (epistemological position; for a detailed account, see Groeben and Schreier 1991; Nüse et al. 1991).

12. The description of this approach involves a mixture of theory and hypotheses that have yet to be empirically tested, especially where assumptions about the reception process and the recipient are concerned (for a detailed account of such hypotheses, see Rothmund et al. 2001b).

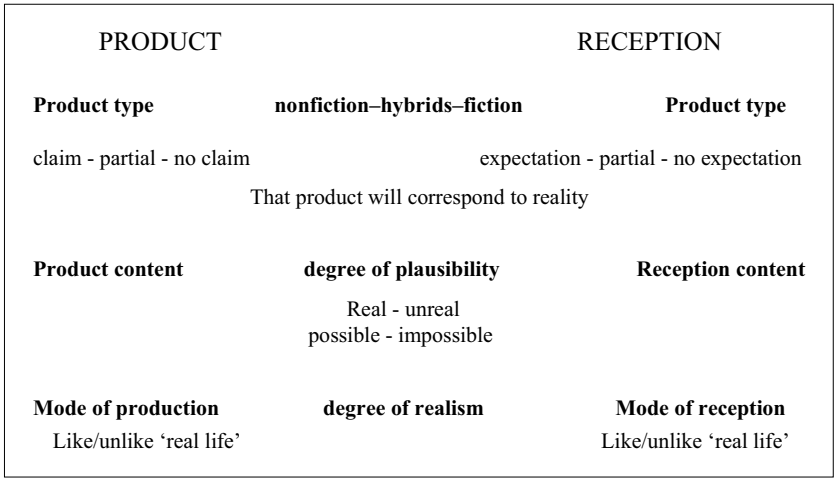


**Figure 1** Three perspectives for evaluating the reality status of media products.

act as signals orienting the recipient to the product's fictional status. This is to take into account that fiction builds upon everyday reality and thus contains many elements that are perfectly plausible, while the content of nonfiction may at times appear quite implausible (such as the news in 2002 about the murders committed by the above mentioned pupil Robert Steinhäuser at his high school in Erfurt). "Evaluating a product's reality status" thus encompasses evaluations of product type, content, and mode, where, for instance, consideration of the content as implausible may, but need not, coincide with regarding the product as fiction.

Second, a distinction is made between the description of the product and its reception. Whether specific orienting signals that may be present in a media product do in fact guide its reception by a specific person will depend (among other factors) on that person's media knowledge. A reader who is not familiar with the device of fictitious editorship may, for instance, start reading Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* on the mistaken assumption that Eco, during a stay in Prague, in fact came across a seventeenth-century manuscript rendering Adson de Melk's handwritten fourteenth-century account of the happenings at Melk. To mark this distinction, any product characteristics that affect the recipient's evaluation of its reality status will here be termed *criteria*.

From a *pragmatic perspective*, evaluation concerns the *product type*. In literary studies, as already indicated, the dichotomy between nonfiction and fiction prevails (see section 2.1 above). In evaluating nonfiction products, recipients will apply the criteria of truth and utility, expecting the prod-

ucts to say something about "reality." In the case of fiction products, these expectations are suspended; instead of truth and utility, criteria such as aesthetic pleasure, novelty, and so forth will be applied.[13] This dichotomous conceptualization does not, however, apply equally well to all genres; the autobiography, for instance, or the "roman à clef" stand somewhere in between the two categories. When reading Hillary Clinton's autobiography, for example, readers expect to learn something about her life; at the same time, they also know that certain details have been left out or modified, if only to protect other persons. This problem of hybrid genres is even sharper in recent media developments, where hybrids (such as the docusoap, the docufiction, the pseudodocumentary, etc.) that defy classification as either fiction or nonfiction have become ever more prevalent. To take these developments into account, we have added the "hybrid" as a third product type that combines elements of fiction and nonfiction to varying degrees (see Nickel-Bacon et al. 2000; Rothmund et al. 2001b). It is assumed that recipients' recognition of individual media products as instances of these product types, and the adjustment of expectations concerning their ontic status accordingly, are guided by conventions which are learned and subject to social and historical changes.

From the *semantic perspective*, evaluation concerns the degree of plausibility of media content, ranging from low (such as the creation of the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) to high (as Charles Dickens's description of nineteenth-century London in *Oliver Twist*). Plausibility in turn is assumed to depend on the specific combination of real or unreal, possible or impossible textual elements (see Landwehr 1975). What is real is possible by definition; conversely, what is possible need not necessarily be real. (In her novel *Kein Ort, Nirgends* [No place on earth], Christa Wolf renders an unreal but perfectly possible conversation between the historically real characters Kleist and Günderrode—unreal because the two never actually met, but possible because the conversation is in line with what is known about the two persons.) The impossible, on the other hand, is also unreal (such as *Frankenstein*) and will detract from the overall plausibility, whereas the unreal is in part possible, in part impossible. In this, the terms *(un)real* and *(im)possible* refer to the evaluation of textual elements, while *(im)plausibility* refers to the evaluation of the entire content. In line with the general distinction between the media product and its reception, product content is differentiated from

13. This is not to say, however, that fiction does not refer to reality or that recipients never interrelate the two; in fact, there is ample evidence of such interrelations (see section 1 as well as the contributions by Andringa and by Gerrig and Rapp in this volume). But only in a nonfiction product does an untruthful reference to reality incur sanctions (for examples see Müller-Ullrich 1998).

reception content, where *product content* comprises the entire information about a real or an imaginary world, and *reception content* is conceptualized as a mental model, the cognitive representation of the product content.

Whereas the second perspective focuses on content, evaluation from the third perspective of *mode* is concerned with formal characteristics (*product mode*) or the quality of the reception experience (*reception mode*). From this perspective, media products and their receptions can be more or less realistic. In the production mode, realism is supposed to vary according to the quality, the intensity, and the style of product characteristics. These characteristics are in their turn assumed to affect the reception mode (together with the media experience and habits of the individual recipient), which will involve more or less suspense, identification, involvement, transportation, and so forth.

In reception, evaluation of the reality status makes use of criteria that correspond to the signals orienting the recipient to the fictionality (or to the factuality) of a media product, as they have been theorized in literary studies. Here we distinguish, with Eco (1994), between ambiguous and unambiguous orienting signals. Pragmatic aspects of the paratext (title, indications of genre, etc.) form comparatively unambiguous signals of fictionality or factuality. Ambiguous are most semantic and formal signals of fictionality, such as unlikely textual elements and combinations, poetic language, or difference between author and narrator. Conversely, likely elements and their combination, everyday language, and so forth act as ambiguous signals of factuality. To the extent that recipients recognize such signals and actually make use of them in evaluating reality status, the signals are transformed into criteria guiding media reception.

From the semantic perspective, it is possible and impossible, real and unreal textual elements which function as signals of plausibility. The content of a media product will be perceived as plausible to the extent that the various elements and their combination are regarded as real and possible (in terms of the individual recipient's world knowledge). Conversely, the product will be perceived as lacking in plausibility to the extent that the textual elements and their combination are regarded as impossible and unreal.

From the perspective of mode, the number of sensory channels addressed by a media product, plot structure, the quality and the intensity of the reception experience are assumed to function as signals and criteria of (perceived) realism. Moving about in a virtual reality environment that encompasses auditory, visual, three-dimensional spatial, and haptic sensory impressions, for instance, will be a more realistic experience than watching a film on television, where the three-dimensional spatial and the haptic impressions

are absent. Likewise, when immersed in the fictional world of a film, one may forget that "it is only a movie," whereas one will continue to be aware of the mediated character of the experience in the case of a film that is less engrossing.

For a more precise differentiation of types of signals and criteria, we further distinguish (following Laucken 1989) among three phenomenal worlds: the material, the experiential, and the cognitive. As applied to the semantic perspective, the *material world* comprises physical features, such as qualities inherent in the natural or the built environment, different species, life forms, and so forth. The *experiential world* covers actions and experiences of a social and emotional kind, for instance. Within the *cognitive world*, we locate phenomena such as theories, types of government, or cognitions of characters in media products. In our approach, this distinction among the three worlds is also applied to the perspective of mode. In this context, the material world covers the sensory aspects of reception (such as vividness of the colors), the cognitive world refers to the stylistic devices used and their impact on the recipient, and the experiential world to the sense of presence in and involvement with the world of the media product (for a more detailed account, see Nickel-Bacon et al. 2000; Rothmund et al. 2001b).

The plausibility of the content of a media product may vary among the three phenomenal worlds. A science fiction like *E.T.*, for instance, is somewhat lacking in "material" plausibility (the spaceship, E.T. himself, etc.); yet it displays at the same time a high degree of plausibility with respect to the experiential world (such as E.T. feeling homesick) and aspects of the cognitive world (Elliot and his siblings immediately thinking of E.T. in terms of a new playmate). If a Bildungsroman, however, were similarly lacking in plausibility—imagine Wilhelm Meister during the years of his apprenticeship encountering a monster from outer space—it would most likely be rejected as a bad example of the genre.[14] On the semantic level, the variability in degree of plausibility among the three phenomenal worlds thus allows for the reconstruction of certain differences in genre (within the product type fiction) and the recipients' expectations concerning these genres.

Regarding the perspective of mode, the distinction among the three phenomenal worlds serves to highlight differences among media. This applies

14. Violations of the conventions and expectations concerning a genre need not necessarily lead to rejection; alternatively, the violation may itself be indicative of another genre. In his discussion of horror, Carroll (1990: 16ff.) points out how the activation of the schema for that genre depends on the monsters that typically figure in tales of horror being represented as in some sense unnatural. If they are, by contrast, treated as nothing out of the ordinary, this is more likely to fit the genre schema for the fairy tale. If the violation does not correspond to any existing genre schema, it may constitute the beginning of a new genre (see below on the pseudodocumentary).

in particular to the material world which, from the perspective of mode, refers to the quality and the intensity of sensory perception. If a medium is capable of addressing a particular sensory channel, this and the resulting sensory impression serve as a signal and a criterion of realism, even more so if the intensity of the sensory impression is similar to real-life experience. Conversely, if a media product does not address a particular sensory channel at all (television, for instance, does not provide any tactile stimulation), the resulting lack of sensory stimulation indicates a dissimilarity to real life and thus serves as a criterion of the mediated character of the experience. It is with respect to the material world that media differ: the print medium, where sensory stimulation takes place only in the imagination of the reader, occupies one end point of the continuum; virtual reality environments the other; and television, 3-D cinema, and so forth fall somewhere in between. It is assumed that the recipients' experience will be the more realistic the more sensory channels are addressed and the more the intensity of the sensory stimulation corresponds to real-life sensory impressions. Of course, the reception mode is not considered to depend on the material world aspects of the product mode alone (otherwise book reading could hardly be such an engrossing activity). Cognitive world aspects of the product mode also have an effect on the reception experience, such as narrative techniques, aesthetic principles of composition, plot structures designed to evoke feelings of surprise or suspense in the recipient, and so forth.

### *2.3. The Interrelation of the Three Perspectives in the Reception Process*

I assume that, at least in principle, the evaluation of the reality status of a media product from each perspective is independent of its evaluation from the other two.[15] Some examples have already been pointed out: pragmatically, a novel like *Oliver Twist*, for instance, constitutes fiction; semantically, it displays a high degree of plausibility in all three phenomenal worlds. As for mode, no sensory stimulation is provided (material world); yet considering the plot structure (cognitive world) that is designed to make one wonder about what fate has in store for Oliver, the reading experience might still be quite engrossing (experiential world). A television documentary on developments in contemporary physics, on the other hand, constitutes nonfiction from the pragmatic perspective. Nevertheless, the program's con-

15. In the following application of the three-perspective approach to the reception process, there will be frequent references to "the recipient." In this, the focus will usually be on how specific features of a media product affect the reception process, all other conditions (such as the exact reception situation or the recipients' media knowledge, media history, real-world knowledge) being equal. In an actual study of the reception process, these conditions would of course have to be specified (for specifications of reception hypotheses, see Rothmund et al. 2001b).

tent (semantic perspective) might be perceived as lacking in plausibility, and recipients who do not have the relevant background knowledge may well find it boring (mode: experiential world), despite the excellent real-life quality and intensity of the audiovisual production (mode: material world).

In spite of this mutual independence among the perspectives, media products and recipients' expectations concerning the products' reality status do not vary freely across the entire range of potential combinations of values under the three perspectives. While it may well be the case that truth is often stranger than fiction, in the normal course of events we will expect nonfiction products to display a high degree of plausibility, not to clash with our expectations concerning the world around us, whereas we will be much more tolerant of a lack of plausibility—or even expect such a lack—in the case of fiction products. Similarly, we will expect the use of certain types of poetic language in fiction products but will be somewhat surprised when we encounter the stream of consciousness technique in a scientific paper. Detailed expectations of this type, differentiating further among the three phenomenal worlds, are cognitively organized and represented as genre schemata. Thus, readers will probably not find a wealth of metaphors instead of fast-paced action welcome in a thriller (and, as a consequence, may end the reception process), whereas in the case of a romance certain types of metaphors will be fine, but not a whole lot of shooting and cars racing each other down steep hills. If for some reason a recipient does not have access to paratextual cues (for instance, someone indulging in "channel hopping" in front of the television), such semantic and formal elements which together constitute a genre schema can also serve to activate that schema: they will thus act as orienting signals, locate the media product along the fiction-nonfiction continuum, and simultaneously channel the recipients' expectations concerning plausibility, stylistic features, and the reception experience.

Yet such genre schemata are by no means invariable. In accordance with the aesthetic convention (stipulating that products within the literary-aesthetic system of communicative actions be evaluated according to criteria such as novelty), genre schemata, as soon as they have been formed, tend to be varied, even undermined by authors (cf. Groeben and Schreier 2000), and part of the aesthetic pleasure of the reception of literary media products consists precisely in recognizing and appreciating this deviation; recipients (provided they have sufficient genre knowledge) are thus able to follow suit and adjust their genre schemata accordingly. Nor is the variation of genre schemata restricted to fiction products. "Edutainment," "infotainment," "reality TV," "docusoaps," and other hybrids manifest such variations across communicative systems and product types. Within the three-

perspective conceptualization of the interrelation between fact and fiction as well as within literary studies (e.g., Eco 1994; Weinrich 1975), however, it has been assumed that the orienting signals of the paratext (and the corresponding reception criteria) are of paramount importance in channeling the reception of media products. This raises the question of what happens in media reception when variations of genre schemata cross the line between the two product types, that is, when the paratextual signals themselves lose their unambiguous status and no longer serve to classify a particular media product as either fact or fiction. In the following analysis, this question will be pursued in greater detail, with the pseudodocumentary *The Blair Witch Project* as an example.

## 3. *The Blair Witch Project*: A Pseudodocumentary and Its Reception

### *3.1. Introduction*

The pseudodocumentary *The Blair Witch Project* tells the story of three students who—as part of a class assignment—set out to make a film about the "Blair Witch," supposed to be wandering in the woods around the small American town of Burkittsville, formerly Blair. In order to get close to the witch, the three students plan to spend three days and nights in the woods. They never return from their assignment; the only trace they leave behind is their footage and a diary, which are discovered a year after their disappearance—in a place where no human being can reasonably have hidden them. The official announcement of the film reads: "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" (see the film's Web page at www.blairwitch.com).

This announcement is part of the film's paratext, and the orienting signals it contains suggest that the film constitutes not merely a documentary, presenting the material left behind by the students, but a documentary about a documentary: a presentation of the students' supposedly documentary material about the Blair Witch. Nor is it a coincidence that promotion of the film took place almost exclusively via the Internet (and by word of mouth). The Internet page accompanying the film contained a wealth of additional material connected to the supposed case, such as an elaborate presentation of the legend surrounding the Blair Witch, photographs of the three students, interviews with the students' friends and relatives, excerpts from (fictitious) news bulletins related to the search for the three missing students, excerpts from the students' diary, and so forth. The Internet promotion of the film was supplemented by yet another documentary, *The Curse of the Blair Witch*, produced by Artisan (the same company that produced *The*

*Blair Witch Project* itself) and shown on the American Sci-Fi Channel shortly before the official release of the film. This forty-five-minute feature presented further details surrounding the case, such as additional interviews, for instance, with the professor who had approved the students' assignment in the first place and is now tortured by guilt feelings. Neither the Internet page nor *The Curse of the Blair Witch* contains any cue as to the fictional nature of the film. *The Blair Witch Project* itself does contain one such paratextual signal of fictionality: a statement to the effect that the search for the three missing students is supported by the film company. But in the first place, this is an ironic statement and as such not readily decipherable by all viewers. It suggests that the documentary might not be all that it seems to be yet does not explicitly affirm the fictional nature of the film either. Second, the statement appears at the very end of the credits, when many viewers will already have left the theater. No other paratextual signals of the film's fictionality are available, not even the names of the actors and the directors, which are completely unknown to the public. On the pragmatic level, the paratext thus locates the film within the category of nonfiction products, casting some doubt upon this status in the credits only.

In terms of product mode, the film is highly realistic. This is most conspicuous with respect to the quality of the shots. As suggested by the paratext, the film is supposed to consist of the footage created by the three students on sixteen-millimeter film using a handheld camera. Entirely in keeping with this suggestion, the pictures are shaky, coarse-grained, and clearly of an amateurish quality. The line between fiction and reality is even further blurred by the fact that these amateurish shots, showing strange happenings in the woods at night and the fear experienced by the three students, can indeed to some degree count as authentic. For *The Blair Witch Project* is not based upon a script in the usual sense; instead, the directors employ the technique of what is called method filmmaking (Goldman 1999; Taylor 2000): The actors are given only a brief introduction on how to handle the camera. They are then sent into the woods for eight days and nights, not knowing what exactly will happen to them. While the actors remained in the woods, their contacts with the directing team were kept to an absolute minimum, via notes passed to the actors. For the rest, the actors were on their own. They had not been given enough food, they got lost, they were frightened at night by the directing team. On the one hand, the hunger, the thirst, the fear shown in the film were thus arranged; on the other hand, they were also authentic, at least to some degree. *The Blair Witch Project* may thus be said to constitute fiction—but a fiction that, for the purposes of presentation, makes use not only of realistic, but sometimes even of real means. This "real(istic)" impression is further supported by the

sheer wealth of the material presented on the Internet page accompanying the film.

From the semantic perspective, however, this situation changes. Of course, the film is not all implausible: Colleges do exist where such class assignments are given, and it is perfectly possible that students might seize upon an old legend about a witch for their film project. And if students really disappeared in the course of such a project (which, while somewhat unlikely, would also be possible), the elaborate search set in motion would largely correspond to the efforts of the police as they are depicted on the Internet site. Other plot elements, however, are not only unlikely but downright impossible (by the standards of our present world knowledge) and thus strongly signal a lack of plausibility. A case in point is the existence of witches walking the earth more than a hundred years after their demise. Such supernatural figures that transcend the distinction between the living and the dead ("fusion figures" in the terms of Carroll 1990: 43) and inspire feelings of horror in both the protagonists and in the viewers (see section 3.3 below) are part of the genre schema of the horror film; the same applies to the plot structure that—proceeding from the onset of rumors about the witch to nightly confrontations between her and the three students—matches what Carroll (ibid.: 99ff.) terms the "complex discovery plot," similarly indicative of the horror genre.[16] As was pointed out above, elements of genre schemata can in turn function as orienting signals to product type—in this case, to the fictionality of the film.

### *3.2. Method and Procedure*

From a theoretical point of view, *The Blair Witch Project* thus presents an interesting case of a hybrid: an entirely fictional film that comes in the guise of nonfiction, is made in a highly realistic manner, and yet contains implausible semantic elements corresponding to the fictional genre of the horror film. How do the recipients react to such a hybrid product? Are they able to see through the disguise—or are they, at least temporarily, confused as to its ontic status? Thus, the main purpose of the study was to explore the recipients' reactions to the film along the dimensions of fact and fiction; no explicit hypotheses were developed.[17]

16. It is strongly suggested, but never actually affirmed in the film, that the students have fallen victim to the Blair Witch. This indecisiveness adds an element of the fantastic to the plot (in the sense of Todorov 1975).

17. A secondary purpose was to explore the suitability of the three-perspective approach for describing reactions to a media product in an everyday reception context. While much has been written about theories of fictionality, hardly any empirical data have, to my knowledge, been provided concerning recipients' perceptions of media products along these lines. Thus there does not exist a benchmark against which to evaluate the suitability of the three-

From a methodological point of view, analyzing the reactions of the recipients poses a number of problems. The most straightforward approach would be to ask the recipients how they perceive the film: is it fact, or is it fiction, and why? This procedure, however, runs the risk that the interviewing procedure might lead recipients to question their initial impressions of the reality status of the film (whatever this initial impression might have been). An alternative access to recipients' spontaneous thoughts about the film is provided by the Internet. Numerous newsgroups exist for the discussion of films; the discussions take place in public, and they are archived (for instance by Google, formerly déjà). Analyzing such newsgroup discussions might thus reveal whether the ontic status of the film is indeed an issue and, if so, how the film is perceived and why. This approach, however, involves problems of generalization. Not everyone who goes to watch a film at the cinema will afterward turn to the Internet for more thorough discussion with other viewers. Participants in Internet newsgroups must therefore be regarded as a specific subsample of the entire audience population (see the contributions in Batinic et al. 1999), and the interpretation of the results should be restricted to this subsample. Despite the restriction, this approach seems the more promising of the two.

The newsgroup contributions were subjected to content analysis, a method suitable for the analysis of textual meaning by categorizing textual units according to a coding schedule. *Content analysis*, however, is itself a broad term under which a number of methods have been subsumed, ranging from the count of formal textual features to the complex analysis of implicit aspects of meaning (see Groeben and Rustemeyer 1994). The type of content analysis chosen in the present study is characterized by the intersubjectivity and the systematic nature of the procedure (Rustemeyer 1992). "Intersubjectivity" implies that the meaning of the texts under study is analyzed and determined not (as in hermeneutic types of textual analysis) by a single individual, but through a comparison of the meanings assigned to the texts by two or more persons ("coders"). The extent to which the coders agree is quantified (into a so-called "coefficient of intercoder agreement"); the higher their agreement, the more it is justified to say that the text as such "has" this or that specific meaning, rather than the text possessing this specific meaning for a particular person. Content analysis in this sense thus goes beyond the subjectivity of the individual understanding of a text.

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perspective conceptualization. For this reason, no hypotheses were tested. Instead, suitability was conceptualized in terms of the percentage of "relevant" e-mails (see below) that can be subsumed under the top-level categories that correspond to the three perspectives. Suitability can be assumed to increase with this percentage, but again there does not exist any benchmark specifying how high such a percentage should be.

The second characteristic, that is, the systematic nature of content analysis, involves a number of specific steps which are always carried out in the same order. The researcher first decides what texts are to be analyzed, then which aspects of their meaning are of interest, and under what conditions it is justified to say that a text possesses a specific meaning. The first decision concerns sampling; the two later decisions refer to the development and the application of the coding schedule at the core of the content analytic method.

In the present study, two samples were used. One comprised 602 e-mails in English, written between June 1999 (just prior to the first public showing of the film at the Sunset Film Festival) and February 2000; this was a convenience sample of those e-mails which were freely accessible on the Internet in February and March 2000.[18] The coding schedule was developed on the basis of these 602 e-mails and then applied to the second sample of altogether 1,157 e-mails, written between June 1999 and February 2001. The sample was randomly drawn from a total of approximately 27,000 e-mails containing the keyword "Blair Witch" archived by Google.com; of these 1,157 mails, 824 were written in English, 333 in German.

The development of the coding schedule consists in specifying as precisely as possible the exact meaning of each category and under what conditions an e-mail is to be coded as an instance of the category. To make the intended meaning of a category even more explicit, examples are provided. In the present study, development of the coding schedule took place in two stages. A first coding schedule was used to determine whether the question of fact or fiction (as conceptualized in terms of the three perspectives: pragmatic, semantic, mode) is actually addressed in the e-mails under analysis. This first coding schedule comprised only two categories: "relevant" and "irrelevant."[19] Trial codings of the first sample yielded an intercoder agreement (on how to assign text passages to the categories) of 0.72. According to J. R. Landis and Gary G. Koch (1977: 165), this value can count as "substantial," and the codings may be considered reliable.

The second coding schedule was only applied to those mails which had previously been coded as "relevant" according to the first schedule; its purpose was to determine in what way and in what respects the reality status of *The Blair Witch Project* was at issue in the e-mails. The pragmatic perspective,

18. A convenience sample may be biased and therefore not count as representative of the population and a valid basis for generalizations. As this first sample is used only for developing the coding schedule and no further conclusions are based upon it, however, this potential bias is of no further consequence.

19. Other topics dealt with in the e-mails that were coded as "irrelevant" include, for instance, the general evaluation of the film or the question of what exactly happened at the end.

the semantic perspective, and the perspective of mode constituted the three major top-level categories; "Playful reference to the reality status of the film" and "Other" were added as fourth and fifth top-level categories. In a next step, the first three top-level categories were further specified, partly in a deductive manner on the basis of the three-perspective conceptualization, partly in an inductive manner, drawing upon the first sample of 602 e-mails. With respect to the pragmatic perspective, it was coded whether the film was explicitly referred to as fact, fiction, or a mixture of the two; it was also determined whether the author of the e-mail did so with certainty ("This is fiction!") or was uncertain ("Did all this really happen, I wonder?"). Additional pragmatic categories involved the reasons why the discussants considered the film to be either fact or fiction. Subcategories concerning the semantic perspective referred to the perceived degree of plausibility (plausible/implausible) and reality (real/unreal) of the film content; apropos perceived plausibility, further subcategories were created, specifying what aspects of the film content, especially the actions of the three protagonists, were regarded as plausible or implausible. A further semantic subcategory was coded if recipients mentioned that the film was based on "method filmmaking." The category of mode in turn comprises one subcategory each for the product and the reception mode. Additional subcategories were generated inductively; these refer, for instance, to the realistic nature of the film material due to its amateurish quality (product) or to fears experienced by the recipients during and after watching the film (reception). The complete coding schedule comprises 52 subcategories; interrater agreement for the trial codings of the mails in the first sample varied between 0.66 and 0.88 (i.e., "substantial" and "almost perfect" values according to Landis and Koch 1977: 165).[20]

### *3.3. Results*

Coding of the sample for relevance (first coding schedule) results in 319 out of 1,157 relevant mails; thus, 27.3 percent of the e-mails in the sample mention in some way the reality status of the film. Of these relevant mails, 109 are written in German and 210 in English. If one further takes into account the date of composition, it emerges that the majority of relevant e-mails (65.3 percent) are written within six months after the release of the film, that is, between July and December 1999. Between January 2000 and February 2001, the average percentage of relevant mails is only 6.7; discussants often do not actually refer to the film but to questions such as the release date

20. The coding schedules were developed and applied by Nico Bonse and Christine Navarra; Martina Panzer and Soheila Owzar carried out a substantial part of the coding.

for the DVD or the quality of different versions of the DVD. Taking into account only the "early" mails (written before the end of 1999), the percentage of relevant mails amounts to 38.6 percent, and among these mails, the question of reality status is thus by no means a minor topic.

Before proceeding to look at the results of the coding according to the second schedule, another step of data preparation is in order. Some, especially those persons who are confused as to whether the film is fact or fiction, may write more than one e-mail. A position that is expressed three times by the same person, however, should not be given the same weight in the results as a position expressed by three different viewers. For this reason, the sample was checked and adjusted for the multiple occurrence of author names: the 319 relevant mails could be attributed to 277 different persons. The following results thus refer to viewers, not to e-mails.

The question of "fact or fiction" is mentioned by ninety-five discussants. Among these, fifty-eight are certain that the film constitutes either fiction or a hybrid (61 percent). While the film is hardly ever regarded as nonfiction (only by two participants), the remaining 39 percent are at least temporarily somewhat uncertain as to the film's ontology. As for the reasons why the film might be nonfiction, the discussants refer most often to information they have gathered from other media products, such as the so-called documentary aired on the Sci-Fi Channel. Altogether, however, reasons for considering the film to be nonfiction are quite rare (eleven cases) by comparison to those given for the film's fictionality (twenty-six cases). Here, too, information from other media products plays a part (five cases; having recently watched an interview with one of the actors, for instance, constitutes strong evidence that this person has not in fact died), as does the disclaimer in the credits (four cases). Overall, only three discussants suggest that the film must be fiction because of the sheer impossibility of witchcraft and the like. Across all subcategories, pragmatic features are mentioned 148 times.

The semantic perspective, which is coded seventy-eight times, appears to be of comparatively less importance in the Internet discussion of the film. Among these mails, the question whether the actions of the protagonists can count as plausible is raised with the greatest frequency (sixty cases). Whether the film refers to real or unreal entities (for instance, whether witches exist) is mentioned only by seven discussants; and nine additional mails refer to the use of method filmmaking by the directors. As to plausibility, the majority of the discussants regard the protagonists' course of action as implausible (forty-two cases), in particular their lack of relevant knowledge, as on how to use a compass (twenty cases). The discussants also think it unlikely that the three students should have continued to film the events happening around them, considering how badly they were supposed

**Table 1** Perception of *The Blair Witch Project* under the Pragmatic Perspective

| | Nonfiction | Hybrid | Fiction | Ambiguous |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Question raised | 5 | 1 | 1 | 21 |
| Assertion made | 2 | 2 | 56 | — |
| Change of opinion | — | — | 7 | — |
| Total | 7 | 3 | 64 | 21 |

*Note*: The results presented here refer to codings of viewers' opinions, not of e-mails. A person is coded as "raising a question," for instance, if that is all she or he does in her or his mails. If she or he begins by raising a question and in a later mail proceeds to assert that the film is fiction, she or he would be coded as having changed her or his opinion. The detailed rules for the coding are specified in the coding schedule.

to be frightened (six cases), that they should have been quite so frightened (four cases), that their technical equipment would have been so meager (three cases), that they did not equip themselves for self-defense (two cases), and so on; seven additional reasons were coded as "miscellaneous." By comparison, only twenty participants argued in favor of the film's plausibility.

The perspective of mode arises 191 times: in 96 cases, reference is made to the product mode; in 95 cases, to the reception mode. Both modes are usually considered to be extremely realistic: with respect to the product mode, seventy-nine persons, as against seventeen, praise the film for its realism. The points that particularly strike the discussants include: that the film leaves much to the imagination (twenty-six cases), the amateur quality of the pictures (sixteen cases), and the high quality of the acting (fourteen cases); again, a number of reasons are coded as "miscellaneous" (thirteen cases). As for the reception mode, eighty discussants stress their involvement in the film (as opposed to fifteen who remained uninvolved). Twenty-three persons tell how they felt frightened even beyond the actual duration of the viewing (for a detailed account, see Cantor in this volume), nineteen point out that involvement is even stronger if one goes to see the film without prior knowledge about the discussion surrounding its ontic status. In sixteen cases, discussants mention the realistic impression made by the film without giving any further details or reasons; other topics include what the recipients would have felt like (seven cases) or would have done (six cases) if they had been in the protagonists' shoes. The subcategory "miscellaneous" is coded nine times.

The remaining top-level categories are only of minor importance compared with those three perspectives. "Playful references to the reality status of the film" occur twenty-seven times; and the top-level category "miscellaneous" is coded in thirty-seven cases.

**Table 2** Correlations between Category Frequencies and Language—Results of Chi-Square Tests

| Category | $\chi^2$ | *df* | Exact Significance, One-Tailed |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pragmatic perspective, total | 3.52 | 1 | .042 |
| Reasons for considering the film fiction | 6.11 | 1 | .016 |
| Reasons for considering the film nonfiction | 5.53 | 1 | .029 |
| Semantic perspective, total | 11.85 | 1 | .001 |
| Content considered implausible | 4.23 | 1 | .036 |
| Content considered plausible | 10.49 | 1 | .003 |
| Perspective of mode, total | 15.83 | 1 | .000 |
| Product mode | 13.39 | 1 | .000 |
| Reception mode | 4.27 | 1 | .029 |
| Playful references to fact and fiction | 6.03 | 1 | .008 |
| Miscellaneous | 4.16 | 1 | .028 |

*Note*: The chi-square test is used here to determine whether e-mails written in German and in English differ with respect to the aspects of the film's reality status that they address. A large chi-square indicates a large difference between e-mails written in different languages. How meaningful this difference is is indicated by the significance in the last column: If lower than 0.05, the difference between German- and English-language mails is so large that it is most likely not due to chance (that is, accidental circumstances obtaining in this particular study) but reflects a genuine difference between e-mails. Table 2 lists all those categories where such a significant difference does emerge. Whether a category is mentioned more often in English- or in German-language mails is explained in the text. The terms *df*, *exact*, and *one-tailed* refer to specifics of the statistical procedure that customarily accompany the other results (for details, see Bortz et al. 2000: 87–130).

These frequency analyses were supplemented by a number of statistical tests (chi-square) concerning potential relationships between the frequency of the various categories and subcategories, on the one hand, and the language of the mail (representing the cultural identity of the discussants), on the other hand. These analyses show that there do indeed exist statistically significant correlations between the language of the mails and their frequency distributions across the (sub)categories, statistically significant meaning that it is extremely unlikely that the results are merely due to chance. It seems more likely that the German- and the English-speaking participants do indeed differ in their receptions of the film (see Table 2). In summary, it can be said that all three perspectives are mentioned more often in the German than in the English mails. Conversely, discussants writing in English make more playful references to the way the film mixes fact and fiction; the top-level category "miscellaneous" was also coded more often for English-language mails.

## 4. Discussion

In this article, a theoretical framework for conceptualizing distinctions and interrelations between the categories of fact and fiction has been presented. The framework involves three perspectives from which to evaluate the reality status of a media product; it also makes use of the concept of orienting signals, distinguishing between those that indicate the product type (fiction, nonfiction, or hybrid), the degree to which the content is to be considered (im)plausible, and the (lack of) realism concerning both the design of the product and the reception experience. It has been argued, moreover, that a particular strength of this framework lies in the assumption that cues associated with the three perspectives may point in different directions, thus allowing for the reconstruction of different genres. Even though the evaluation of a media product from one perspective is in principle considered to be independent of its evaluation in the remaining respects, it is also assumed that the pragmatic, paratextual signals are of particular importance: in a sense, they frame the reception process and may guide the recipients' expectations with respect to the other two perspectives.

This last assumption led to the question of how recipients react when they are confronted with a media product that not only transcends traditional genres but constitutes a hybrid, not permitting an unambiguous classification as either fact or fiction. To explore this question, the approach was applied to the pseudodocumentary horror film *The Blair Witch Project* and its reception. In the film itself, a particular combination of orienting signals (as well as the lack of such signals) could be identified under all three perspectives, constituting the specifically hybrid quality of the film. Paratextual signals point to the supposedly factual status of the media product; the film contains only one such somewhat hidden and indirect signal to the effect that it may not be "fact" after all. The mode of production is highly realistic; the content, however, also involves elements which are clearly implausible and thus point to the fictional status of the film. Such combinations of cues under the three perspectives also recur in later examples of the pseudodocumentary published on the Internet. These include the Citizens for Truth's attempt to throw light on the supposed assassination of Bill Gates (www.macarthurpark.com), the story of Cassandra, whose boyfriend has turned into a practitioner of black art (www.creepysites.com), or the search for the female serial killer Ally Farson (www.allyfarson.com). In the meantime, the intention to film a documentary about the events has become so much part of the genre that it may be considered an orienting signal on the semantic level.

The three-perspective framework has also proved useful in the analysis

of the reception of *The Blair Witch Project*, drawing upon newsgroup discussions of the film on the Internet. In the first place, the divide between fact and fiction, as conceptualized in this framework, indeed proves to be a topic of spontaneous discussion. In that part of the sample where the majority of such relevant e-mails is to be found (i.e., mails written no later than 6 months after the release of the film), the question of the reality status of the film is raised in 38.6 percent of all contributions. Looking more closely at those relevant mails (319 in all), it could be shown that issues concerning the 3 perspectives are mentioned more often by the discussants than are other aspects of the reality status. Considering the comparatively low number of e-mails that were assigned to the additional inductive categories that are not part of the three-perspective approach, the theoretical framework appears to cover most aspects of the spontaneous discussion of this topic.

Among the three perspectives, mode is mentioned most often, whereas content (the semantic perspective) receives comparatively little attention, and the pragmatic perspective falls somewhere in between. As it turns out with respect to the pragmatic perspective, the discussants are not entirely taken in by the directors' play with the paratextual cues. For the most part, the film is correctly perceived as fiction; almost 40 percent of the discussants, however, are at least temporarily uncertain whether the film constitutes fact or fiction. It seems justified to assume that the very fact that the pragmatic perspective is mentioned at all—even if only to say that the film is fiction—constitutes evidence of a certain amount of confusion on the part of the recipients. Ordinarily, when people go to the cinema to watch a film, fictionality status is simply taken for granted and does not become a topic of discussion in the first place.[21]

The reasons the recipients give for their perceptions of *The Blair Witch Project* offer insight into the orienting signals that guide them. It is particularly striking that the clearest and most unambiguous cues pointing toward the fictional nature of the film are hardly ever mentioned: reference to the credits is made only in four out of twenty-six cases and to the sheer impossibility of the film content in only three out of the same twenty-six cases. Instead, it is usually background knowledge (concerning the marketing strategy) that leads this group of recipients to regard the film as fiction; and those who explain why the film might after all be fact likewise refer

21. This assumption is indeed borne out by a study in progress, which compares the reception of *The Blair Witch Project* with that of *The Sixth Sense*, another horror film released at approximately the same time, also is considered to be somewhat atypical of the genre, and also turned into a surprising success. Regarding the latter, however, the pragmatic perspective is hardly ever mentioned—and, if it is, usually in the context of the question whether *The Sixth Sense* can in fact be considered a horror film. Its fictional status is not an issue.

most often to information they had seen or heard in the media. Considering that background knowledge has itself most likely been gained from other media, these results demonstrate the increasing use made of mediated information in evaluating the world around us—even in cases where other and more unambiguous criteria are readily available.

The results concerning the semantic perspective further support the contention that readily available criteria are only rarely used. The film content is indeed considered implausible by the majority of the discussants—but for reasons other than had been pointed out in the course of the analysis of *The Blair Witch Project* (see section 3.1 above). It is not the impossibility of witchcraft, or of people walking the earth centuries after they have supposedly died, that guides the evaluation of the film's plausibility in the newsgroup discussions but, so to speak, minor implausibilities, such as the protagonists' not knowing how to use a compass.

From the perspective of mode, *The Blair Witch Project* is most often considered to be highly realistic, with respect to both the product and its reception. Where the product mode is concerned, recipients make far more frequent reference to relevant orienting signals than they do under the other two perspectives. The amateurish quality of the pictures, the sincerity of the acting, the lack of a script are all given as reasons why the film strikes the recipients as particularly realistic; what the recipients like most of all about the film, however, is the fact that the horror is largely left to the imagination. As for the reception mode, it is the emotions evoked by the film (sometimes lasting far beyond the actual reception) that the discussants mention most often. Another aspect of the reception mode that is frequently referred to concerns the relationship between prior knowledge about the fictional status of the film and the enjoyment during reception. Nineteen discussants point out that a lack of background knowledge is most conducive to enjoyment, whereas prior knowledge of its pseudodocumentary nature often leaves the recipients disappointed. This result shows that there are some recipients who willingly enter into the game of the directors yet do so with a kind of double consciousness: they keep themselves deliberately ignorant of the fictional status of the film, with a view to a higher enjoyment of the ambiguities, yet knowing full well on a metalevel that keeping themselves ignorant is necessary only because they already know that the film is fiction. Not all recipients belong to this group, however; some are genuinely confused as to the film's ontology.

Finally, discussants writing in English and in German clearly differ in their receptions of the film. Whereas the German contributors tend to discuss the film from the three perspectives, most notably with respect to the product mode, those writing in English (a group that may of course com-

prise all kinds of nationalities and cultures) take a more playful approach. This seems a result worth following up in future reception studies.

Thus, there emerge three types of viewers. First of all, there are those who know perfectly well that the film is fiction; they watch it as a horror film and evaluate it according to the standards of the genre. A second group of viewers also realizes that the film is fiction; yet they appreciate the film's specific status as a hybrid and enjoy the oscillation between fact and fiction that it provides. And a third group of viewers, while eventually coming to realize the film's fictionality, are nevertheless temporarily confused as to its ontology. As mentioned above, these results should not be generalized beyond the group of newsgroup participants. However, studies in progress on the reception of Internet pseudodocumentaries (e.g., concerning a police search for the serial killer Ally Farson [www.allyfarson.com; see Schreier and Owzar 2002]) point in a similar direction to the results presented here. This analysis of e-mails is presently being supplemented by an interview study. Preliminary results again point to the above three groups; in addition, however, it also becomes apparent that those recipients who are uncertain about the reality status of the Web site continue to be so even when confronted with strong counterarguments (such as the existence of an explicit disclaimer; ibid.). The intense confusion of some of the recipients may be due to the combination of a novel genre, crossing the line between fact and fiction, and an as yet somewhat unfamiliar medium of presentation, the Internet. If this is indeed the case, such Internet pseudodocumentaries might well constitute a new avenue for "literature" to enter "life"—at least for as long as it takes recipients to adjust their genre schemata and media knowledge accordingly. The above reception studies concerning Ally Farson also suggest that this is in fact already happening: among those who consider the site fiction, quite a few make reference to *The Blair Witch Project*. *The Blair Witch Project* is thus acquiring the status of a prototype around which recipients organize their knowledge concerning the genre of the pseudodocumentary.

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