

Critical Approaches
to the Films of
M. Night Shyamalan

SPOILER WARNINGS

Edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock



CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE FILMS
OF M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

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INTRODUCTION

TELLING STORIES ABOUT TELLING STORIES THE FILMS OF M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

JEFFREY ANDREW WEINSTOCK

SPOILER WARNINGS

IT MUST BE ACKNOWLEDGED AT THE OUTSET THAT M. Night Shyamalan so far has mostly been a kind of one-trick pony. It also must be admitted, however, that it's a pretty neat trick. With the exception of Shyamalan's first Hollywood film, *Wide Awake* (1998), and his most recent offering, *The Happening* (2008), in each of Shyamalan's major releases events that initially seem to be haphazard, unrelated, and even perhaps unexceptional are recast as significant, interrelated, and all part of a larger sequence of events.¹ There comes that seemingly inevitable moment in each of his films—call it the Shyamalanian “click”—when everything falls into place and the viewer realizes (or is made to realize through a series of flashbacks) that everything that had appeared coincidental or nonsensical wasn't accidental or meaningless at all but rather directed by some controlling force. The most famous of these ironic realizations—and arguably the most effective—is of course the terrific moment in *The Sixth Sense* (1999) when both child psychologist Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) and the viewer realize simultaneously that Malcolm is dead, having been shot at the very start of the film. For many, the “ah ha!” moment here was stunningly visceral as the film's entire narrative suddenly was recast in a different light and earlier curious details now made sense.² “*Of course* the little boy, Cole (Haley Joel Osment), runs from Malcolm at the start—Malcolm is a ghost. *No wonder* Malcolm and his wife Anna (Olivia Williams) don't speak at their anniversary dinner (and she picks up the check!)—*he's dead!!!*” Similarly, at the

end of *Unbreakable* (2000), when David Dunn (Bruce Willis) shakes hands with Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson), flashes of telepathic insight reveal to him and the viewer that Elijah has been manipulating events all along, causing a series of spectacular disasters intended to identify and locate his “unbreakable” superhero counterpart. In Shyamalan’s most explicitly religious film (with the exception of *Wide Awake*), *Signs* (2002), the pieces fall into place when the viewer discovers along with the protagonist, Graham Hess (Mel Gibson), that the dying words of Graham’s wife weren’t random last misfires of expiring neurons but instead prescient instructions on how to deal with the menace of future nasty aliens. While in Shyamalan’s most cynical film, *The Village* (2004), Ivy Walker (Bryce Dallas Howard) and the viewer learn that the much-feared monsters (“Those We Do Not Speak Of”) haunting the woods are all a hoax perpetrated by the village elders and, in a secondary revelation for the viewer alone, that the film is not set in the seventeenth or eighteenth century as the viewer has been led to believe, but rather in our contemporary moment. And then in *Lady in the Water* (2006), a seemingly random amalgamation of apartment complex residents all turn out to have special skills and specific roles to play in awakening the latent talents of Vick Ran (Shyamalan himself) and ensuring the safe return of the mermaid-esque “Narf” named Story (Bryce Dallas Howard) to the “Blue World.”

In each of these films, Shyamalan’s bait-and-switch slight of hand—the undercutting of the viewer’s expectations by each film’s culminating ironic reversal—creates a curious situation not just for viewers, but also for commentators who, in order to preserve the more-or-less pleasurable shock of discovery for those who have yet to see the film in question, either must speak obliquely about the film’s conclusion or are obliged to preface discussion with an admonitory “spoilers warning” placard. The subtitle of this collection (and of this section of the introduction) bears in mind the fact that one cannot talk about Shyamalan’s films without taking into account their endings—and this often means doing something all too uncommon in our contemporary moment: considering the expectations and experiences of other people. There is a kind of tenderness associated with the “spoiler warning” designation, one that speaks to the communal power of narrative and expresses the wish to share one’s experience of surprise and delight with others.

However, because one can’t speak about Shyamalan’s films without discussing their endings and one can’t talk about the endings without discussing the *de rigueur* plot twists, viewers now ironically have been conditioned to anticipate precisely such an ironic reversal in any Shyamalan film, which to a certain extent delimits the effectiveness of the

plot twist—if one oxymoronically is prepared to be surprised, then the surprise arguably is a lesser-order epistemological one (what will the surprise be?) rather than an ontological one (I was not expecting any surprise at all).³ Stephanie Zacharek's negative appraisal of *Lady in the Water* on Salon.com brings together the obligatory “spoiler warning” alert when discussing Shyamalan's films with this idea of anticipated surprise in a way that foregrounds this law of diminishing returns and introduces us to one of the most important themes in Shyamalan's films—and one that will preoccupy much of the remainder of this introduction (as well as several of the essays to follow)—faith:

Up-front, I must tell you that by reading this, you may encounter a spoiler or two, not because I want to wreck any potential surprises in *Lady in the Water*, but because I no longer have any idea what constitutes a surprise in a Shyamalan movie. The fact that Bruce Willis, in *The Sixth Sense*, was actually dead—OK, that I got. But in *Signs*, when the alien turned out to be a tall, faceless extra tiptoeing around Mel Gibson's living room in stretchy PJs—one who could be vanquished by a bucket of water—I lost all faith in Shyamalan's alleged mastery of the surprise-shockeroo plot twist.

Zacharek then goes on to express her disappointment with the plot twists of *The Village* before really laying into *Lady in the Water*.

As noted, the key word in Zacharek's appraisal for our purposes here is “faith.” Zacharek lost faith in Shyamalan's skill as a storyteller when the anticipated surprise was not sufficiently shocking or coherent. This observation effectively condenses several themes that will echo throughout the contributions to this collection: the role of faith in Shyamalan's films, the power of narrative to endow the world with meaning, and the significance of the director as a godlike figure who manipulates events and viewers according to a predetermined plan.

Shyamalan's films are all to varying extents what one could refer to as “metanarratives”—self-reflexive stories about the telling of stories and the importance of stories in making sense of our lives. And hovering above each narrative about storytelling is the increasingly intrusive figure of the godlike director who ensures that each detail has its place in a larger coherent structure. In contrast to the postmodern “death of metanarratives” famously postulated by philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition*, Shyamalan attempts to reinstill faith in explanatory paradigms.⁴ In each of Shyamalan's major releases, we start with broken people in a fallen, lifeless world and witness to varying degrees the ways in which narrative restores coherence to and effects the spiritualization of desiccated secular existence. Shyamalan's films are so appealing (and at the same time have

increasingly struck such a discordant note with jaded postmodern sensibilities) because at heart they attempt to return us to a mythical prelapsarian time when the world made sense and when people fit comfortably into a larger plan—that is, they seemingly attempt to revive faith in an era of cynicism. And for Shyamalan within his films, the key to restoring community and finding one's place within it is the sharing of stories.

STORY'S STORY

The character Story's name in *Lady in the Water* makes explicit what everywhere has been implicit throughout Shyamalan's *oeuvre*—that he is telling “Story's story,” that is, that he is telling stories about the telling of stories and the power that narrative has to repair a broken world and to impose meaning on the chaos of existence. The movie in fact begins precisely with a myth, a brief animated sequence explaining that, in a fantastical long ago, the denizens of dry land and of “the Blue World” shared a common bond and lived in harmony, but that this communication between worlds has been forgotten. Ironically, it is mankind that has drifted—lost its sense of completeness, community, and its capacity for wonder. Into this dry, fragmented T. S. Eliot-esque wasteland is sent Story (Bryce Dallas Howard), a creature who, Muse-like, will awaken the latent talents of a struggling writer whose subsequent manifesto will change the world and bring about healing. Story's name tells us that she is an allegorical creature, the embodiment of narrative itself, and the Blue World from which she originates can be interpreted as the unconscious, both personal and collective. It is the wellspring of creativity and the place where things lost will be found.⁵ And, with psychoanalytical overtones echoing themes in *The Sixth Sense* (see below), *Lady in the Water* suggests that overcoming repression and telling one's story is a necessary first step toward healing.

Language and the telling of stories quickly emerges as a—if not *the*—central theme in *Lady in the Water* and is connected to the prospects for psychic and social regeneration. Story emerges into “The Cove,” an apartment complex full of misfits who, to varying degrees, are lost or broken. Significantly, many of the complex's residents are also authors. As Michael Bamberger comments in his chronicling of the making of *Lady in the Water*, *The Man Who Heard Voices*, “The movie [is] filled with writers: Vick, who can't get his pen in gear; old Mrs. Bell, animal lover and failed writer; Mr. Farber, the movie critic; Cleveland Heep, often writing in his journals” (136). Even those characters not explicitly identified as writers are in many cases concerned with language and narrative: Mr. Dury (Jeffrey Wright) is a crossword puzzle master, Young-Soon Choi (Cindy Cheung) translates Korean myths for Cleveland as told by her mother,

Mr. Bubchik (Tom Mardirosian) is man who “has no secrets” because his wife is a persistent gossip, the Perez de la Torre sisters speak in Spanish. It is also notable that the film’s central protagonist, Cleveland Heep (Paul Giamatti), has a pronounced stutter when not in the presence of Story that impedes his ability to communicate and seems to reflect his broken connection with his past as well as his current alienation.

Ironically, in this film about blocked writers and the importance of narrative, we discover that even Story herself is unable to articulate her tale. While she neither stutters nor suffers from writer’s block, the fairytale laws that govern what she can and cannot say prevent her from explaining to the residents of The Cove what must be done to heal her and help her to return home. Her story too requires translation. Thus, over the course of the movie, the apartment complex residents must work together to tell Story’s story and each of the primary characters must find his or her place within that narrative. What emerges from this situation is an act of communal storytelling. Cleveland, Vick, and Anna Ran (Sarita Choudhury), Vick’s sister, extrapolate from clues and signs Story provides the roles that must be played (Symbolist, Healer, Guardian, Guild). The three then enlist the aid of other apartment complex dwellers in filling out this special cast of characters and, when all the pieces are properly assembled, (after various misfires and incorrect assumptions), Story is healed and dramatically—but in keeping with her Muse-like status—returns home on the wings of a giant eagle.

The importance of storytelling works on several levels in *Lady in the Water*. Story’s ostensible purpose is to inspire Vick, who will go on to produce a world-changing manuscript. However, Story, for her continued existence, also requires the other primary characters to become collaborators with her—coauthors of her story. And, as her narrative comes together, they too come together—both communally and metaphorically. Communally, the saving of Story requires that they work together, each playing his or her appropriate role. Metaphorically, the healing of Story requires the characters to varying degrees to overcome psychic trauma and alienation and, in good Hollywood fashion, to *believe* in the impossible. In the same way that Vick is inspired through his meeting with Story, the other characters to differing extents are transformed as well through the process of telling Story’s story, which helps them to tell their own.

This transformation through the telling of stories is most evident with the film’s central protagonist, Cleveland Heep, while the power of narrative to reinstill faith is most concisely expressed through the peripheral character, Mr. Leeds (Bill Irwin). As concerns Cleveland, what we discover is that (similar to the elders in *The Village*) he has suffered a

profound loss. He was a doctor and, while absent from his home, his wife and children were murdered. This event precipitated an existential crisis for Cleveland, causing him to lose faith in himself, in others, and in the meaningfulness of existence. Cleveland gave up his medical practice, withdrew from the world (again, like the elders in *The Village*), and assumed the job of superintendent at The Cove apartment complex where no one (with the exception, we learn, of Mr. Leeds) knows him or of his past. Cleveland, one should acknowledge, has not repressed the tragedy involving his family, but neither has he come to terms with it. He remains melancholic, guilt-ridden, and broken. In the process of helping Story, Cleveland's own story of loss, recorded in his journals, comes to light and, as Cleveland shares his tragic story, the viewer observes a shift in Cleveland from melancholic alienation to presumably salubrious grieving and reengagement with the world.

Similar to Cleveland Heep, Mr. Leeds has also lost faith in the goodness of humanity and the meaningfulness of existence. Day after day, he sits in his chair before the TV, watching news reports about war and mankind's propensity toward violence. He even asks Cleveland if the latter thinks mankind deserves to be saved. Despite his depression and existential angst, however, he has not surrendered himself entirely to nihilism—he still retains the spark of hope. In this, he is a concise reflection of what we can take to be Shyamalan's vision of our modern moment: he has lost faith but he *wants* “to believe in something other than the awfulness”—and the healing of Story presumably provides him with the evidence he needs to support the belief that the universe isn't simply chaotic and random.

Ultimately, *Lady in the Water* is exemplary of all Shyamalan's major releases up to that point in that it is about narrative structures of belief and the ways they impose meaning on the unruliness of existence. For Bamberger, the film is thus about faith: “Faith in the power of a family, a tribe, a guild, groups of all sorts. Faith in our ability to heal others and ourselves. Faith in storytelling in all its forms: biblical storytelling; ‘the Hindu tradition of storytelling,’ as Night's father put it; the storytelling parents do with their children, easing them into their nighttime dreams” (246). Crucially, the specific story told here matters less than the *act* of creating stories, which is vital and life-giving and quintessentially human. To place one's faith in the stories, to believe in them, is not so much to take the stories literally, be they from the Bible or the Mahabharata or Shyamalan's invented Korean myth, but rather to embrace the urge to create, to give life, to make meaning. Finally, the lesson of *Lady in the Water* is that, when we tell and listen to stories with one another, we get in touch with Story, the creative force that originates from deep within,

and this force holds us together, humanizes us, and imposes structure on the unruliness of existence.

HISTORY'S STORY

Unbreakable is the film most immediately connected to *Lady in the Water's* theme of the power of storytelling to prompt self-renewal, bolster community, and restore coherence to existence. Like *Lady*, the narrative of *Unbreakable* is preceded by background information—in this instance not a fairytale about a mythical time gone by, but instead facts about the volume of comic books sold annually. Following this brief introduction, we learn the early history of Elijah, a man born with Osteogenesis Imperfecta, a disease that causes his bones to be exceptionally brittle. In order to coax the understandably fearful boy (young Elijah is played by Johnny Hiram Jamison), who has been dubbed “Mr. Glass” by his schoolmates, out of his apartment, his mother (Charlayne Woodard) uses comic books as a lure, placing them on a park bench visible from the apartment's window. In these early scenes of the movie, comics are presented as the medium through which a fragile, scared little boy is able to overcome his agoraphobia and emerge into the world, even as the stories themselves, through the seductive power of narrative, abstract the boy from his immediate circumstances and allow him to enter into a mythical universe of iconic heroes and villains.

If young Elijah is presented as easily breakable at the start, Bruce Willis's character, David Dunn, is initially presented—as all Shyamalan's protagonists inevitably are—as broken. With his marriage on the rocks, the virtually affectless David, who has worked for the past five years as a security guard, is preparing to leave his wife and son should he get a job in New York. Despite being the only survivor of a horrific train wreck, David feels no joy, guilt, or rage. Instead, he just seems to be going through the motions of living—he is clearly as much of a wreck as the train that was carrying him.

What the viewer discovers is that David does not know his own story or his place within the larger scheme of things and that it takes others—notably his son (Spenser Treat Clark) and Elijah—to gift him with his own story. Elijah (Samuel L. Jackson) gets the ball rolling by contacting David and leading him to his art gallery, Limited Edition, where he deals in fine art prints of comic book panels. There, Elijah (who sounds a good bit like Scott McCloud in his book *Understanding Comics*), backed by Egyptian hieroglyphics, explains his theory of comics to David: comics are an “ancient way of passing on history” that reveal truths about the human condition.⁶ David, Elijah suspects, is part of larger archetypal

story of good and evil, strength and weakness. If he, Elijah, with his brittle bones, is on one end of the spectrum, it stands to reason, according to Elijah, that there would be someone on the other end of the spectrum, someone virtually invulnerable, someone “put here to protect us.” David, he proposes, could be just the kind of person “these stories are about.”

David, of course, is initially incredulous but, aided by his adoring son’s unwavering faith in his father, he slowly begins to acknowledge what he has always on some level felt but never consciously acknowledged: he is different from the common lot of humanity.⁷ He has never been ill or injured. He has superstrength. And he possesses a sort of preternatural precognitive ESP—telepathic Spider Sense, if you will—that allows him flashes of insight into the people he touches or brushes against and that shows him the evil deeds that they have performed. Once David acknowledges his gifts and is inserted into this comic book narrative of good and evil, hero and villain, his life turns around. He is rejuvenated, as is his marriage. He has found his calling, his place within the larger scheme of things. In sum, David experiences a restoration of *faith*, a renewal of belief that the universe is orderly and balanced and that he has a meaningful role to play in the larger scheme of things.

The surprise ending to the film is that, once David acknowledges his gifts, he discovers that Elijah is yang to his yin not just in being exceptionally friable, but in being exceptionally *evil*—Elijah is the supervillain who has caused a series of disasters killing scores of people precisely in order to locate David, his superhero alter ego. In an ironic way, Elijah is like Story, removing David’s “writer’s block” and allowing him to continue his story. And David is a synthesis of *Lady in the Water*’s Vick, whose narrative will change the world, and Cleveland Heep, who needs to recover his own story before he can heal. In the same way *Lady in the Water* is a story about the telling of stories, *Unbreakable* is itself a live-action comic book about comics and, gradually, as the ontological boundaries between the “real-world” and the fantasy world of comic books dissolve over the course of the movie, Elijah’s philosophy of comics is confirmed: comics are a form of congealed history. They communicate profound truths about ourselves and our place in the universe. As in *Lady in the Water*, one is asked to believe in the power of storytelling to combat the chaos of contemporary existence and to endow the universe with meaning. *Unbreakable*, like *Lady in the Water*, finally is about the way the stories we tell in fact tell our own story.

SYMPTOMS AND SIGNS

If *Lady in the Water* and *Unbreakable* affirm the power of storytelling in general, *The Sixth Sense* and *Signs* explore the efficacy of two specific

metanarratives, two immensely powerful worldviews or ordering paradigms, to impose structure and meaning on existence: psychoanalysis and religion. While *The Sixth Sense* focuses on the intersubjective constitution of meaning and the necessity of dialogue for overcoming psychic trauma, *Signs* affirms in a fairly straightforward way the power of faith in God. In each case, we are asked to believe in a particular type of story that orders and organizes existence.

In *The Sixth Sense*, Dr. Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) is a child psychologist who has put his wife second in relation to his career. Working with Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment) presents him with a second chance of sorts to make up for his failure with Vincent Grey (Donnie Wahlberg), the young man who invades Malcolm's home at the start of the film and shoots both Malcolm and himself. According to the movie's famous tag line, Cole "sees dead people." What the viewer discovers of course is that Cole really *does* see dead people but, however gruesome and scary they may appear, for the most part they aren't mean, only sad. And what they really want to do—why they seek Cole out—is to tell their stories. Cole thus by the end of the movie becomes a sort of therapist himself, inviting in unhappy spirits and allowing them to tell their stories, which presumably allows them to find peace.

The trick of the movie, as anyone with even a passing familiarity with it knows, is that Malcolm himself is dead, having been shot by Vincent at the start of the film, but he is unable to acknowledge this fact. In this, the child psychologist in fact is an exemplary model of the concept of psychic trauma provided by Freud and more recently developed by literary and cultural critics such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, Caruth characterizes trauma as a kind of "missed experience," an overwhelming event "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and therefore [which is] not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). The traumatic event is not available to conscious memory, but nonetheless surfaces through various symptoms. Malcolm has suffered the ultimate trauma: he has been murdered. In this, he literalizes the sort of affective deadness that can characterize victims of trauma. Further, Malcolm (not surprisingly) feels himself to be detached and aimless and provides accurate insight into both his ontological and epistemological states when he tells Cole a story in the latter's hospital room: "Once upon a time there was a prince, who was being driven around . . . He drove around for a long, long time . . . Driving and driving . . . It was a long trip . . . He fell asleep . . . When he woke up, they were still driving . . . The long drive

went on . . .” Malcolm here reveals that he is on autopilot, asleep at the wheel, outside time. And his desire to help Cole, as Malcolm himself is aware, is a sort of repetition compulsion, the desire to make up for his failure with Vincent that, although he is not at this point consciously aware of it, leads to his own demise.

Although Malcolm is initially presented as the doctor and Cole the patient, the roles reverse as Malcolm narrates his problems to Cole—not only about his desire to help Cole as a way to make up for failing Vincent but also about his marital difficulties. According to Malcolm (who narrates his story in the third person), he’s “not the same person he used to be. His wife doesn’t like the person he’s become. They don’t speak anymore. They’re like strangers.” According to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their *Testimony*, it is the presence of an auditor—a witness to trauma—that helps the victim of trauma come to acknowledge and own his or her own story. Although Malcolm does not narrate to Cole the events surrounding his own demise, his interactions with Cole-as-therapist push him toward the recovery of his own lost memory, which bursts dramatically to the surface during the conclusion’s repetition of the opening scene of thwarted intimacy between Malcolm and his wife. Malcolm finally comes to own his death, so to speak—to recognize and acknowledge the conclusion to his own story—through the process of helping a young boy deal with distressed ghosts who need to tell their stories. *The Sixth Sense* then is a movie, like *Lady in the Water*, about the need to overcome repression and to narrate trauma, to integrate traumatic events into narrative memory in such a way that one takes ownership of one’s own story. It is a movie, like *Lady*, about the necessity of telling stories, only Story here is replaced by the figure of the analyst, the auditor who listens to trauma and “hears the speech delivered by the other’s wound” (Caruth 8), which, in turn, allows the speaker to come to terms with his or her own experience.

Whereas the explanatory metanarrative ultimately affirmed by *The Sixth Sense* is that of psychoanalysis, *Signs* straightforwardly supports a Christian conception of a universe governed by an often-inscrutable but ultimately benevolent deity—a universe in which, to use the language of the film, there are no coincidences. At the start of the film, following the death of his wife, Colleen (Patricia Kalember), who was struck by a motorist (Ray Reddy, played by Shyamalan himself) who fell asleep at the wheel, Reverend Graham Hess (Mel Gibson) has lost his faith and relinquished his ministerial position. He angrily tells his children and brother that he is not going to waste his time on prayer anymore and, in a central scene in the film, once the aliens have made their presence known by

appearing over large cities, he lays out two competing conceptions of the universe to his brother, Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix). Option number one is that nothing happens simply by luck or coincidence but that events are in accordance with some divine plan. People who believe this are guided by hope. Option number two is that things just happen the way that they happen, without rhyme or reason, and that there is no divine oversight. People who believe this, according to Graham, recognize that, whatever happens, they're on their own and this fills them with fear. Graham, following the death of his wife, has decided upon option two as he explains to Merrill, "There is no one watching out for us," and concludes, "We are all on our own."⁸

The subsequent course of events, however, leads Graham to revisit the circumstances of his wife's death and to reconsider his conclusions. What is borne out by the film is that it was not simply coincidence that Ray Reddy fell asleep at the wheel and struck Graham's wife, but rather that it was—in Ray's words—"meant to be." His dying wife's advice to Merrill to "swing away" becomes an enjoinder to use his bat to fend off the aliens; his son Morgan's (Rory Culkin) asthma saves his life when his inability to breathe prevents his inhaling of the alien's poison gas; and his daughter Bo's (Abigail Breslin) neurosis about water provides the key to fending off the aliens when it is discovered that they are allergic to it and half-filled glasses (which Graham had started to clean up previously, only to stop himself) are readily available throughout the house. All of these events force Graham to reconsider his conclusion that the universe is governed only by luck and coincidence and, instead, to agree with his son that "someone was looking out for [them]." At the end of the film, Graham reconfirmed in his faith, resumes his position within the church.

More explicitly than any other of Shyamalan's films, *Signs* affirms the power of a particular metanarrative, a particular explanatory paradigm—religion—to console, comfort, and lend coherence to day-to-day existence. In its rather heavy-handed manner, *Signs* counters contemporary postmodern cynicism by insisting that "signs" of God's presence are all around us, if only we are able to "see"—which is the command that Graham's wife gives to him just before his death. *Signs* also interestingly develops the parallel between a controlling God and an auteur director more fully than any other Shyamalan film—a point to which I will return below.

RUNNING TOWARD HOPE

At first glance, Shyamalan's *The Village*, the last of Shyamalan's major releases to be discussed here, might not appear to fit easily within this framework of films that emphasize the power of faith in narrative

(storytelling in general, psychoanalysis, religion) to restore coherence to existence and effect psychic and social healing. It is certainly true that *The Village* is the darkest and most cynical of Shyamalan's films. What *The Village* shares with Shyamalan's other films, however, is an emphasis on the power of narrative and storytelling to endow the world with meaning and to create community. The important difference between the storytelling in *The Village* and in Shyamalan's other films is that the storytelling in *The Village* is done in bad faith. The village elders, out of fear, create and consciously perpetuate a lie that they consider preferable to an unsettling truth. Or, more radically, believing God to be dead, they hubristically have installed themselves in His place.

As is the case with each of Shyamalan's films excluding his most recent *The Happening*, *The Village* is a movie that attempts to reconcile the existence of violence, horror, and tragedy in day-to-day existence with some sense of purpose or direction to the universe. Similar to Cleveland Heep in *Lady in the Water* and Graham Hess in *Signs*, each of the elders in the village of Covington Woods (a name echoed in *Lady* by The Cove) has suffered a loss so profound that, in the language of the film, he or she "questioned the merit of living at all" and made the decision to drop out of the world. Edward Walker's (William Hurt) father was murdered by a business partner, Alice Hunt's (Sigourney Weaver) husband was robbed and murdered, Mrs. Clack's (Cherry Jones) sister was raped and murdered, and so on. Presumably having met as part of a support group for survivors of tragedy, the survivors developed their plan for a society set apart from the modern world—one celebrating a simplified existence and pastoral values exemplified in communal meals and collective governance. Unfortunately, in order to maintain this community, the elders resort to deception and hypocrisy, thereby inviting into their community the same evils from which they fled.

Again like Cleveland Heep who records his true history of loss and sorrow in his journals, the village elders literally lock away their tragic pasts in wooden boxes, prompting Lucius Hunt (Joaquin Phoenix) to observe that there are "secrets in every corner of this village." And, in place of sharing their true histories with their children, the elders weave a disingenuous narrative of the village, its relationship to "the Towns," and of "Those We Do Not Speak Of" monsters that prowl the woods surrounding the village. But, as we know from Shyamalan's other films, failing to acknowledge or assume one's history—that is, failing to know or tell one's story—is always bad. The movement in *The Village* is toward overcoming gaps in speech and a resumption of "true" history. The stoic Lucius must confess his love for Ivy, locked boxes must be opened and the

contents (significantly, newspaper clippings) displayed, and the village's secrets must be revealed—if only to Ivy and the viewer.

And if not acknowledging or telling one's story in Shyamalan's filmic universe is bad, replacing the truth with a lie is worse. The elders in *The Village*, with the intention of protecting the community they have founded, not only deprive their children of modern technologies such as medical care that can improve the quality of life but also consciously invent lies to keep their children from transgressing the village's boundaries. The inevitable result is that they end up harming those they wish to protect. Ivy's blindness we learn was preventable, Noah Percy (Adrien Brody) ends up dead, and the children of the village are as fearful of "Those We Do Not Speak Of" as the elders are of the ambient violence of modern existence in "The Towns." What *The Village* ends up affirming is that there is truth and there is falsehood and authentic healing and community can only be based on the conscious assumption and truthful narration of one's history to an auditor. One's story must be shared for it to become one's story.

The Village, like Shyamalan's other films, finally is a story about the power of stories to construct our sense of reality. It ends up, however, being darker and more cynical than his other films because it emphasizes the way in which narrative can be used as a tool of political control. This is to say that *The Village* is more explicitly concerned with ideology than any of Shyamalan's other films. All of Shyamalan's films can be said to be about ideological demystification—about "waking up" to reality, to truth. However, *The Village* makes clear through the disingenuous narrative spun by the elders that day-to-day existence is itself interpreted in light of particular narratives, culturally specific understanding of the ways the world works. *Matrix*-like, *The Village* maintains faith in the idea that one can penetrate the façade of ideology and access the underlying truth.

IT WAS MEANT TO BE

It is this faith in the possibility of truth perhaps more than anything else that ironically defines Shyamalan's films—and returns us to the initial subjects of spoiler warnings and "sleight-of-hand" for the truths that we as viewers are being asked to believe are not in fact universal truths but rather Shyamalan's truths—Shyamalan's narratives. As I initially observed, Shyamalan's story in *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, *Signs*, *The Village*, and *Lady in the Water* is more or less the same: what initially seems random, coincidental, unexceptional, meaningless, and/or disconnected is subsequently revealed to be purposeful, significant, and interconnected. In order to arrive at the truth that exists beneath the surface of appearances,

one must “see” the “signs” and interpret them properly (Colleen Hess’s exhortation to her husband thus can also be taken as instructions to the audience). We discover that Malcolm Crowe is dead, David Dunn actually has super powers, things happen for a reason, *Those We Do Not Speak Of* are a lie, Cleveland Heep is the healer not the guardian—that the universe is a rational place governed by immutable laws that balance good and evil. But the source of these truths, the benevolent force ensuring the coherence of these filmic worlds, is not God, but his cinematic stand-in: Shyamalan himself. The final irony of all these films about faith is that what we are being asked to believe in is not God or destiny but Shyamalan himself.

Shyamalan is often figured in critical discourse as a type of modern auteur, a filmmaker like Hitchcock, Welles, Hawks, and Ford who stamps each of his productions with his own distinctive signature and imprints them from start to finish with his own personal style; this idea of the auteur filmmaker finds its fullest expression in the parallel between God and the director. It is *Signs* that makes this comparison most explicit when the viewer realizes that it is not God who ensures that Colleen Hess’s dying words turn out to make sense, that Morgan’s asthma prevents his inhaling poison gas, and that Bo’s water neurosis provide the means to defeat the aliens, but Shyamalan, the author/director/producer. Graham is right at the end that someone is looking out for the Hess’s, but his renewed reverence is misplaced. And, just to make sure that the viewer doesn’t overlook the analogy between God and the director, Shyamalan inserts himself into the film as the man who kills Graham’s wife and then tells Graham, “It’s like it was meant to be”—which, of course, it was.⁹

Obviously, none of the characters in a scripted film ever has free will. Shyamalan, however, carefully foregrounds this fact for us through the trick of withholding and then revealing essential information (Malcolm is dead, Elijah has caused the accidents, there are no monsters in the woods, and we are in the twenty-first century) and making it clear that fate not chance governs the destiny of the characters (both Graham’s wife and daughter catch glimpses of a preset future, a future that Story can see clearly; the characters in *Lady in the Water* all have predestined roles). What needs to be added here is that we, as spectators, are manipulated as fully as are the characters. As we view Shyamalan’s films, we consistently are led to believe one thing, only to discover that the truth is something else. In a sense, we are lied to as completely as are Ivy and the children in *The Village* who are presented with an understanding of the world that turns out to be based on imposture and fraud. The difference of course is that Ivy’s reality is presented to the viewer as a fiction for his or her enjoyment.

This then is Shyamalan's last trick—while he presents himself as a type of modernist, asserting the continued relevancy, power, and significance of ordering metanarratives, he finally is a closeted postmodernist, ironically telling stories about the importance of telling true stories while highlighting their contrived, formulaic nature. The faith that he asks for from the viewer is not faith in God or psychoanalysis or even love. It is faith in the filmmaker's handling of plot.¹⁰ It is both a final irony then and extremely fitting that these stories about the telling of stories require silence on the part of viewers. The inevitable "spoiler warning" placard, while an act of generosity on the part of the discussant, helps to ensure that Shyamalan controls the reception of his films. We are asked not to talk about these stories about stories so as not to spoil the story for someone else.

CODA: THE HAPPENING

I've carefully side-stepped talking about *The Happening* above because it appears to break in several significant ways from the pattern established in Shyamalan's previous films. *The Happening* is a film that lacks the Shyamalanian click entirely—its plot does not involve misdirection or an ironic twist. Indeed, it progresses in straightforward and compelling fashion from start to finish and one can certainly discuss it without the obligatory "spoiler warning" alerts required of the other films. And, even more significantly, it lacks closure. The cause of the outbreak is never confirmed, and, at the end of the film, the cycle of suicide is shown to be starting again in Paris.

It may be that, aware of his one-trick pony reputation, Shyamalan carefully crafted *The Happening* to upend viewer expectations—the trick is, as I've suggested, there is no apparent trick. And yet, when the nuances of the movie's title are considered, *The Happening* may well be Shyamalan's sneakiest movie yet. In a general sense, a "happening" is an ambiguous occurrence—an undefined something that takes place. In the context of the film, something is happening. People are inexplicably committing suicide. A hypothesis that plants are behind it is presented, but never ultimately confirmed. In a more specific sense, however, the title of the film refers to 1970s experimental theater; "happenings" were improvised and often spontaneous performances or spectacles often involving the audience. And herein lies the irony of *The Happening*. Capitalizing on the linguistic playfulness of the movie's title, we can say that the happening that happens in *The Happening* is no happening (in the theatrical sense). That is, what the film presents as spontaneous and uncontrolled is in reality carefully structured, filmed, edited, and scored. In this sense, the title itself can be read as

the ironic twist—one inherent in mainstream cinema itself in which that which has been structured in advance is presented as spontaneous.

This realization reinserts faith into the equation. In the absence of any other compensatory metanarrative, we are left with what has always underlaid Shyamalan's films: faith in the filmmaker. The film is Shyamalan's *Happening*; the twist is that there is no apparent twist; and although Shyamalan himself doesn't appear in this one, his mark is everywhere apparent.

TELLING STORIES ABOUT STORIES ABOUT STORIES

The imperative not to talk about Shyamalan's films now brings us to this collection of essays on the films of M. Night Shyamalan—the first of its kind—which adds an additional layer of complexity upon Shyamalan's already-dense *oeuvre*. The contributors to this volume all *do* discuss Shyamalan's films—tell stories about the productions of an accomplished storyteller. Some of the contributions focus on thematic issues in particular films, while others examine how Shyamalan's stories function as forms of cultural critique, while others explore the narrative of Shyamalan himself.

I've divided up the sections into a double feature of sorts, two sections focusing on Shyamalan's films with what we'll call an "intermission" in the middle consisting of two essays that focus on Shyamalan himself. The first section, "Narrating Shyamalan, Narrating Culture," includes essays that address themes or narrative devices that link several of Shyamalan's films. In Elizabeth Abele's "The Home-Front Hero in the Films of M. Night Shyamalan," Abele looks at the representation of masculinity in *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, and *Signs* (and, to a lesser extent, *Wide Awake*) in light of Hollywood's—and America's—shifting understandings of what constitutes heroism. As Abele points out, one of the especially interesting features of these films is the casting of lead actors (Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson, Samuel L. Jackson) famous for their roles in big-budget Hollywood action movies. What Shyamalan does in each case, however, is to revise what constitutes masculine heroism by having his male protagonists turn inward rather than outward. Self-understanding and the reaching of masculine potential is shown to be intimately connected not to destroying things but to building nurturing relationships with others.

In Elizabeth Rosen's "Reaching Out to the Other Side: Problematic Families in the Films of M. Night Shyamalan," Rosen observes that Shyamalan's films prompt a series of questions about families and, in particular, the relationships of parents to children. Rosen's contention is that Shyamalan deliberately develops a parallel between the supernatural and the fraught relationship between parent and child. According to Rosen, Shyamalan represents the gap between adult and child not as transitional

space that the child will ultimately cross through to become an adult, but rather as an unbridgeable space more akin to that which separates the ghost from the living person: each may see the other, but ultimately neither entity fully occupies the space of the other's world.

Sharing Abele's interest in representations of masculinity in Shyamalan's films is R. Barton Palmer who in his "Melodrama and Male Crisis in *Signs* and *Unbreakable*" explores Shyamalan's representations of gender in light of "male crisis." According to Palmer, Shyamalan's social conservatism in this regard "can be understood not only as a refiguring of family melodrama more generally, but also as a startling revision of the masculinist preoccupations of 70s cinema." Both *Signs* and *Unbreakable*, Palmer contends, champion a structured social order predicated upon the authority of the patriarch.

David Sterritt's "Spellbound in Darkness: M. Night Shyamalan and the Epistemological Twitch," explores tensions between plot and style in Shyamalan's films and focuses on Shyamalan's productive use of ambiguity. At his best, says Sterritt (who, I should hasten to point out, is not uncritical of Shyamalan's work), he uses "cinema's capacities for suggestion, indirection, and insinuation to open up fresh avenues of thought, especially with regard to *liminal* phenomena that are themselves ambiguous and impossible to classify in ordinary ways." Making use of the insights provided by the psychoanalytic theorizing of Lacan, Kristeva, and Žižek, among others, as well as the anthropological approaches of Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, Sterritt considers the implications of what Shyamalan shows and doesn't show in his filmmaking.

In "Four Films by M. Night Shyamalan: Oh, the Irony . . ." Katherine A. Fowkes investigates the similar narrative structure of Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, *Signs*, and *The Village* and relates the films' construction to audience affect. According to Fowkes, the motor force of each of these four films—as I've begun to sketch out in this introduction—is irony, a disconnection between expectation and outcome. However, while each of the four films trades in ambiguity and raises questions about the possibility for correct or truthful interpretation, in each case this ambiguity is finally displaced in favor of epistemological certainty. This leads Fowkes to conclude that the circular design and the irony inherent in each film can be seen not so much as contrivance as "a plea for sense and sincerity in a cynical world."

Rounding out this section is a contribution from film critic and scholar Emmanuel Burdeau whose poetic meditation on Shyamalan's films draws together threads from the preceding essays and extends them in interesting ways. Burdeau is interested in the ways in which Shyamalan plays

with genre and generic expectations—the ways in which he juxtaposes what Burdeau refers to as the “family fable” with the generic conventions of horror and science fiction—and the ways in which Shyamalan persistently thematizes the act of interpretation itself, bringing potential meanings while allowing others to dissipate. For Burdeau, Shyamalan’s *oeuvre* is thus on a conscious level all about “signs,” about constructing meaning through the interrelation of aural and visual elements.

Following these six essays, the middle two essays take time out from analyzing Shyamalan’s narrative productions and instead focus on the production of Shyamalan himself as a type of narrative—as himself a sign in the semiotic sense. Rather than performing close readings of Shyamalan’s films, Matt Hills, in his chapter, “Making Sense of M. Night Shyamalan: Signs of a Popular Auteur in the ‘Field of Horror,’” instead situates Shyamalan’s films and Shyamalan himself within the larger sphere of what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to as cultural fields of production. With an emphasis on *Signs*, Hills considers the types of intertextuality that popular culture forms draw upon and the types of “cultural and symbolic capital” that are embedded in horror films. In this sophisticated analysis, Hills concludes that Shyamalan’s brand of “new sincerity” attempts to fuse elements of the art-house film and the summer blockbuster and that a Bourdieu-based analytical framework helps to account for the polarized audience response to *Signs*.

With intriguing connections to Hills’s analysis, Kim Owczarski contributes to the developing field of “star studies” with her essay, “Reshaping the Director as Star: Investigating M. Night Shyamalan’s Image.” Owczarski proposes that the image of the director as star is a contradiction between competing understandings of what constitutes artistic filmmaking and what constitutes mainstream filmmaking. By attending to Shyamalan’s comments about his craft, representations of Shyamalan in the popular media, and marketing approaches to his films, Owczarski concludes that Shyamalan’s star image reveals not only the importance of the star director image but also the contradictions inherent in such a position.

After this brief intermezzo, the collection continues in “Stories by Shyamalan” with five essays that each consider one of Shyamalan’s Hollywood blockbusters. Kicking off this section is Jane F. Thrailkill’s fascinating contribution, “Sigmund Freud, Pedophile Priests, and Shyamalan’s Filmic Fairy Tale (*The Sixth Sense*).” According to Thrailkill, *The Sixth Sense* can be understood to reprise the crusade of Jeffrey M. Masson to bring to light the actual, rather than fantasized, sexual abuse suffered by Freud’s early psychoanalytic patients, while also subtly directing the viewer’s attention to much more recent instances of child “seduction”—the sex abuse scandal within the Catholic church. Thrailkill asserts that *The Sixth*

Sense challenges us to revise some of our dearest—and most damaging—culturally held beliefs about the power and purity of therapists and priests and also about the roles of adults in general in the lives of children.

In “Unbreak My Heart: The Melodramatic Superhero in *Unbreakable*,” Matt Yockey contends that, in *Unbreakable*, Shyamalan merges the melodrama and superhero genres. According to Yockey, by rendering the hero of his melodramatic discourse a superhero, Shyamalan indicates that the Dunn family crisis represents a broader crisis of patriarchal authority. Therefore, the restoration of the patriarch in *Unbreakable* indicates the return not only of a heroic protector of the family but of society at large as well.

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the historical context of post-September 11 America, Miriam Jordan and Julian Jason Haladyn’s analysis of *The Village* is concerned with ideas of evil, ideology, and the use of narrative as a tool of political control. In “Simulations of Evil in M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Village*,” Jordan and Haladyn explore *The Village* through the lens provided by the more recent work of philosopher Jean Baudrillard and interpret the film as an expression of the potential perils of post-September 11 Manichean thinking that divides the world up into good and evil, us versus them. In this chapter, the authors argue that, in *The Village*, the simulation of evil and the manner in which the village elders use these simulations to create and maintain an artificial dichotomy between good and evil ends up becoming more oppressive than the evil against which they are defending. What Shyamalan therefore demonstrates is the ways in which fear of terror itself becomes a form of terrorism.

Shifting focus from *The Village* to *Lady in the Water*, Nick Parker and Nirmal Trivedi’s “‘Something ancient in modern times’: Myth and Meaning Making in M. Night Shyamalan’s *Lady in the Water*” considers the invective heaped upon the film by critics and concludes that the negative reviews in fact are the product of an incompatibility of critical modes. Whereas Shyamalan’s film combines the semiotic openness of children’s stories and folktales, critics assess it based on forms of logic antithetical to these modes of storytelling. The authors conclude that *Lady in the Water* “toys with the notion of coherence,” resulting in a resistant text forcing viewers to engage in an interpretive act that endows the film with meaning.

Rounding out the collection is Murray Pomerance’s erudite “What Ever Is *Happening* to M. Night Shyamalan: Meditation on an ‘Infection’ Film.” Situating Shyamalan’s film within the tradition of “infection” movies, Pomerance emphasizes Shyamalan’s concern with the body and its borders. And, with interesting connections to David Sterritt’s contribution to this volume, Pomerance also foregrounds ambiguity in

Shyamalan's film—the search for causation and the line between what is and is not—or can and cannot—be represented on screen.

All the essays in this collection engage on varying levels with the paradox embedded in Shyamalan's body of work—the injunction not to speak about films that are all about the importance of speaking. Rather than operating as “spoilers,” however, the essays, individually and taken together, highlight the richness of Shyamalan's cinematic texts and bring to light buried levels of significance that open up the texts in new and interesting ways. These essays are all stories about stories about stories—but they are stories that, like Shyamalan's own—take seriously the importance of storytelling and delight in considering what makes a good story effective. Rather than being conclusive—the final word—they instead inevitably foreground the fact that there are other stories to be told, other perspectives to be taken, other avenues of investigation to be explored. And, as Shyamalan continues to make movies and cultural critics continue to debate them, we look forward to seeing how these stories turn out.

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NOTES

1. *Wide Awake*, a film that Shyamalan himself was unhappy with as a result of the control exercised by producers Bob and Harvey Weinstein, was a flop and, while it shares the typical Shyamalan theme of the search for meaning in the universe, it is in many respects aesthetically, structurally, and thematically different from Shyamalan's later work. Most of the contributors to this volume have chosen to consider it a form of “juvenilia” and reference it only in passing, if at all.

2. In a comparison of *Lady in the Water* to *The Sixth Sense*, film critic David Edelstein wrote of the latter in *New York Magazine*, “Along with many others, I was blown away by the end of *The Sixth Sense*. For two hours I’d snickered at the artiness of the compositions, at the way Bruce Willis’s character was so ludicrously alienated from the world that he had no spatial relationship with anyone but the freaky kid. And then: Kaboom! Talk about using a critic’s jadedness to pull the rug out from under him!”
3. From this perspective, perhaps the “twist” of *The Happening* can be said to be the fact that it lacks one. More on this below.
4. Here again, *The Happening* is a notable exception. At the end of the film, there ultimately is no conclusive explanation for events. See Pomerance in this volume.
5. Indeed, Cleveland Heep (Paul Giamatti) finds a variety of lost objects in Story’s underwater shelter at the bottom of the apartment complex’s swimming pool.
6. In McCloud’s marvelous semiotic analysis of comics, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, he proposes that as cartoons become more basic, they become more universal. See especially 31–45.
7. David’s initial incredulity contrasts markedly with the immediacy of belief in Story evidenced by the The Cove dwellers in *Lady in the Water*—something that bothered critics no end—and encapsulates the difference between the two films: *Lady* is a sort of magical realist fairytale while *Unbreakable* is a type of coming out story in which deviance is first resisted before being embraced.
8. Graham, it should be pointed out, is not an especially good existentialist. While he experiences the angst and dread associated with the absence of God, Shyamalan permits him none of the compensatory sense of liberation that believing that one makes one’s own destiny allows.
9. Shyamalan has played increasingly intrusive roles in his films. In *The Sixth Sense*, he plays the doctor who examines Cole after Cole is attacked in an attic crawl space. In *Unbreakable*, he plays a small-time drug dealer. In *Signs*, as noted, he plays Ray Reddy who kills Graham’s wife. And, while he does not appear in *The Village*, Shyamalan’s inserting himself into *Lady in the Water* as the writer whose manifesto will change the world especially piqued the critics’ ire. Edelstein, for example, writes that “Given the twerpy messianism of *Lady in the Water*, it’s pretty clear that M. Night Shyamalan regards himself as a sacred vessel.” Edelstein also notes the religious character of *Lady* when he adds, “Every member of the apartment-complex surrogate family jumps right onboard the narf express, instantly committed to beating back scrunts with the power of faith. . . . In this, his religious allegory for the whole family, the token doubter is a pale little prisspot of a film critic. . . .”
10. Edelstein in fact notes this in his review of *Lady in the Water* when he comments that the film conflates “spiritual doubt and Shyamalan doubt.”

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FEATURE ONE

NARRATING SHYAMALAN,
NARRATING CULTURE

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THE HOME-FRONT HERO IN THE FILMS OF M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

ELIZABETH ABELE

THE PATH OF THE AMERICAN HERO IN THE POPULAR imagination has generally been outward and alone. As expressed in the famous phrase (coined by John B. L. Soule in 1851 but generally associated with Horace Greeley) “Go West, young man, and grow up with the country,” the quintessential American man leaves behind his family in search of adventure that will simultaneously assist in developing American society. The quest of the lone, stoic hero has long been central not only to American literature and popular culture but also to defining American masculinity, capitalism, and politics.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, certain action directors like James Cameron (*Terminator* [1984]) and John McTiernan (*Predator* [1987]) moved toward more complex action narratives like *Abyss* (1989) and *Hunt for Red October* (1990). On the surface, these latter films still met audiences’ generic expectations, presenting heroes that managed to do their duty; however, the heroes’ *primary* commitment was actually to their families—whether literal or constructed. These heroes’ success depended as much on their emotional courage as their physical prowess. Still a part of the Hollywood landscape, this alternative version of the American hero I refer to as the “home-front hero,” one who heads home as soon as the explosions end.

In his films, writer/director M. Night Shyamalan moves a step further than other directors in developing this home-front hero, discarding the external trappings of action films in order to focus on the figure of the hero himself. Shyamalan’s films reject the extroverted quest and

center the “action” on the home—possibly as Shyamalan himself has rejected going West to Hollywood, choosing instead to live and work in the Philadelphia area surrounded by his extended family.

In *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Unbreakable* (2000), and *Signs* (2002), Shyamalan deliberately inverts the action film subgenres of, respectively, the noir-detective, superhero, and alien invasion. To emphasize his deliberate revision of standard action formulas, Shyamalan casts actors known for their violent, action roles—Bruce Willis, Samuel L. Jackson, and Mel Gibson. However, their quests in Shyamalan’s films are introverted and take place within territory generally unfamiliar to a hero. Taking the three films together, there are no car chases, two gunshots, and only two brief fight sequences. (There are three explosions in *Unbreakable*, but they are suggested or muted.) In place of special effects and violence, Shyamalan continually makes the risky move of depending on a script, acting, and his audience’s imagination—challenging our expectations of the American hero and his quest. Instead of looking outward to save society, the heroes of these films each focus on preserving the home—and perhaps their own souls. And, significantly, while these films subvert the expectations associated with action blockbuster genres, they still managed to make money at the box office comparable to their more traditional and extroverted models (all three have topped \$100 million). This may have been the product of strategic casting and savvy marketing, but it also suggests the significance of the home-front hero as a reflection of contemporary American concerns and the desire to rethink what constitutes a hero.

THE RISE OF THE HOME-FRONT HERO

The late 1970s saw the exuberant screen return of the American hero in the action blockbusters. To restore faith in American masculinity shaken by the cultural and political upheavals of the 1960s, the hero’s body, as epitomized by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, was consistently identified by its intrinsic strength, a pure force in contrast to society’s cynicism and bureaucratic corruption. As Susan Jeffords writes, “Just as Reagan reestablished the boundaries of the presidency, hard bodies reestablished the boundaries not only of the individual masculine figure but of the nation as a whole” (27). Yvonne Tasker similarly notes the cultural significance of the muscular action hero when she comments, “Muscular action movies have been seen to represent the emergence of something new, to be specifically a product of the 1980s in their articulation of national and sexual politics” (65). As part of this reclamation of American masculinity, Bruce Willis and Mel Gibson presented their sculpted physiques as they pummeled bad guys in 1980s blockbusters.

Of course, this presentation of the seemingly natural hero's body obscured the fact that these bodies were constructed by athletic trainers, equipment, and rigid workout routines. And this constructedness of the hero's body parallels the way that the hero's commitment to his duty is likewise rigidly constructed. Any personal needs or desires are suppressed or muted; Tasker notes the "significant silence of the heroes . . . [and] the primacy of the body over the voice in the telling of these stories" (6). These constructed bodies are inseparable from their constructed duty to society, with their overdeveloped bodies shielding underdeveloped selves.

However, about the time Ronald Reagan left office, the masculine motto of "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do" began to be called into question. This "crisis" of American masculinity surfaced in men's groups, self-help books, and popular films. David Savran writes, "The self-appointed guardians of male spirituality are unanimous in imagining masculinity as a fragile and vulnerable commodity—oppressed with 'internalized oppression'" (296). There was a sense that masculinity like that of Stallone's Rambo had become poisonous to men, a disease to be overcome. In her 1990s study of men and their relationship to work, Kathleen Gerson finds the work of contemporary men no longer provides enough meaning to justify their personal sacrifices: "It is no longer clear what goals a man should pursue, much less how he should pursue them. Indeed, it is no longer what it means to be a man. As women have become almost as likely as men to shoulder the responsibilities of supporting a family, it has become harder for men to defend and justify advantages based solely on being born man" (5). With the workplace's failure to provide adequate recognition and sustenance to male workers, some men began to migrate from outward adventure and the public sphere back home.

This call for personal engagement and emotional honesty became a reappearing theme in many films of the late 1980s and 1990s, including action films and dramas. Fatherhood, not always defined by biology, is an underlying theme in many masculine-rehabilitative dramas. Amy Aronson and Michael Kimmel note the prevalence of fatherhood as both a test and a way to heal in films beginning with *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) through *Jerry Maguire* (1996) and *The Kid* (2001, featuring Bruce Willis). Frequently, before the protagonist can get the girl, he must "prove himself worthy as a father figure to her children" (45). Women and children are presented as providing the key for achieving mature manhood.

The narrative of the hypersuccessful man who finally faces himself and realizes "what really matters"—family and connections with others—only after total loss was particularly popular in 1991, dubbed by Fred Pfeil as "The Year of Living Sensitive" (37). Films like *Regarding Henry* (1991),

The Fisher King (1991), *Hook* (1991), and *City Slickers* (1991) all make use of this plot trajectory. However, though these films all end with a celebration of the reformed, sensitive husband/father/lover/friend, Pfeil rightly points out the profound distrust of masculinity implied by these films: “If white straight men cannot be changed short of shooting them, there is not much use pressing them to do so” (61). Therefore, the female characters are so grateful for his begrudging reform that they often make major sacrifices to facilitate it. Pfeil describes the toxic nature of contemporary masculinity that these narratives imply, and that this “disease” appears to be more rampant among successful white men.

Action films of the late 1980s and 1990s revise the model of the hyper-macho hero developed in mid-1980s action pictures, participating in the larger cultural conversation about the nature of masculinity. And, in contrast to the toxic masculinity of masculine-redemptive films, some of them arguably provide a healthier model of gender relations. The action genre can provide an arena for masculine testing that is simultaneously committed to preserving communities. In his survey of police films from 1980 to 1997, Neal King observes, “By the conclusions of these stories many heroes have bettered their lives—reconciled with intimates, forged bonds with sidekicks, massacred enemies, or earned respect from communities that they have saved. But just as many other heroes have suffered serious losses, most rooted in the guilt they share with the criminals they hunt” (3). While both these groups document the cost of heroic service to society, the former group offers something positive: the model of heroes who deliberately better their lives, choosing the opportunity provided by the action-packed crisis to improve their relationships and thereby avoid the trap of loss combined with guilt.

This frequent placement of home as the ultimate goal is a significant move, since the action blockbuster functions as an important part of popular conversation about gender. The home-front hero represents a major development in the tradition of the American hero—an alternative heroic path that exists alongside Spiderman, Batman, and the films of Stephen Spielberg and Tom Cruise. The classic, stoic loner remains a staple of Hollywood—but it seems that in our current cultural moment, masculinity and nurturing relationships with others are no longer mutually exclusive.

REMATIALIZING FATHERHOOD: THE SIXTH SENSE

Shyamalan may agree with contemporary filmmakers and cultural critics that there is a crisis facing American men. He does not, however, blame masculinity as a toxic disease that men must overcome, nor does he

blame feminist women. Shyamalan instead blames the wear-and-tear of everyday life that leads men into social malaise and bad choices. As the comic book art-dealer/prophet Elijah (Samuel L. Jackson) explains in *Unbreakable*, “These are mediocre times . . . people are starting to lose hope. It’s hard for them to believe that extraordinary things can exist inside themselves or others.” What, however, can reinvigorate and “save” Shyamalan’s heroes is not spectacular, redemptive violence, but quiet comprehension of the significance of family and nurturing relationships.

Despite the parallels in the opening circumstances and themes, Shyamalan’s films follow quests that are markedly different from their generic counterparts. The protagonists of *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, and *Signs* are all floundering men, overwhelmed by their senses of personal failure. Instead of finding strength in their past accomplishments, their former glories only add to their perceptions of themselves as frauds. They distance themselves from their families not out of a lack of love, but because of their fear that they themselves are unworthy of love. Unlike the public and violent catharses of the protagonists described by King and Pfeil, these men ultimately find comfort in staying close to home and emulating the faith and insights of young boys. While muscular action films show the domestic as the antithesis of the heroic, Shyamalan shows that courage and compassion are complementary, enhancing both qualities and allowing the hero to survive, both physically and emotionally. Contra literary figures such as Natty Bumppo, Huck Finn, and Shane who “light out for the territories” at the end of the narrative, the home-front hero is shown by Shyamalan to be an asset both to society and his natural or constructed family. Shyamalan’s protagonists must move beyond the ease—and the trap—of commonsense and the everyday. It takes courage to unleash the full potential of the domestic for joy and intimacy, recognizing that each day is more than “everyday.”

The figure of the home-front hero is evident as early as Shyamalan’s critical and commercial disappointment, *Wide Awake* (1998), which contains many of the ingredients of Shyamalan’s later, more fantastic films. This film truly stays “close to home” in its portrayal of a family situation very similar to Shyamalan’s own childhood: a two parent-physician household in a posh Philadelphia suburb with Catholic schooling for the children. In this film, Joseph (Joshua A. Beal), the young boy, is the protagonist, not the supporting character. After his beloved grandfather dies, Joseph embarks on a quest to meet God—not for personal gain but to make sure that his grandfather is all right. He turns to Catholicism to reveal the answer, but learns that his direct experience and compassion is of more value than dogma. By following his quest to its end, Joseph not only discovers his own spiritual ability but also comes to a clearer

understanding of love and the importance of family. This search for faith and the acknowledgment of personal gifts present in *Wide Awake* remains the central concern of Shyamalan's next three films.

The Sixth Sense focuses on the psychological underpinnings of the noir thriller, dispensing with the gumshoe and, following the model of films like *Spellbound* (1945), *Marnie* (1964), *Dead Again* (1991), and *Color of Night* (1994—featuring Bruce Willis), putting the therapist in the role of the detective. Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) solves the mystery of what afflicts his young patient through quiet conversation rather than brute force. It's worth pointing out that, although Willis has bulked up for many of his film roles, his persona has always been more than just physical action. As Tasker notes, "Willis is known for his voice as much as his body, and his role in these films [*Look Who's Talking* franchise—*Look Who's Talking* (1989), *Look Who's Talking Too* (1990)] as a wise guy enacts a different kind of masculine performance to that associated with the bodybuilder" (74). Shyamalan arguably cast Willis in *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* both for his persona as an action hero as well as his proven ability to show the man underneath.

The film opens with Dr. Malcolm Crowe's private celebration with his wife after receiving public recognition for his work with children. She takes his award more seriously than he does: "Finally someone recognizes the sacrifices that you've made, that you have put everything second, including me, for those families they are talking about. They are also saying that my husband has a gift. You have a gift that teaches children how to be strong, in situations where most adults would piss themselves." Not coincidentally, the (less famous) tagline of *The Sixth Sense* was, "Not every gift is a blessing." His wife's speech reveals the cost she and Malcolm have paid for his gift and for his service to society. And, unfortunately, his gift does not make him infallible. His failure to help one patient, Vincent Grey (Donnie Wahlberg), leads to Malcolm's being shot—and shakes his faith in himself as a husband and a therapist.

The young boy Cole (Haley Joel Osment) also has a gift: as the memorable line from the film trailer tells us, he sees dead people. A fatherless and friendless boy, Cole's immense compassion brings frustrated and angry ghosts to him—a burden that he is unprepared to handle. His guilt and confusion over his gift threaten to separate him from his mother, his only personal connection. He fears that if she knows his secret, she will reject him as do his classmates.

Malcolm begins Cole's treatment because he believes that Cole presents a chance for his own redemption: since Cole's problems resemble Vincent's, Malcolm's success with Cole would balance his failure with

Vincent. But, while he treats Cole, his greatest desire is to “talk to [his] wife again, like [they] used to. Like [they] were the only two people in the world.” When Malcolm believes that his treatment of Cole is at cross-purposes with his personal life, he considers transferring Cole to another psychologist: “I can’t be your doctor anymore. I haven’t paid enough attention to my own family. Bad things happen when you do that.” Like Willis’s famous character John McClane in the *Die Hard* films, Malcolm recognizes that his professional duty has jeopardized his family—and that his responsibility to family, not society, is what counts.

However, as Malcolm and Cole both cry in this scene, Malcolm realizes that Cole *is* family. After listening to Vincent’s session tapes, he accepts that Cole’s gift—like Vincent’s—is real. Like a good father, Malcolm supports Cole in learning how to use his gifts. He helps Cole understand what the ghosts want of him and accompanies him on his first task. Malcolm’s last meeting with Cole is to attend Cole’s performance as the lead in the school play (appropriately as young Arthur in *The Sword and the Stone*)—a performance his working mother had to miss. Having begun as a social outcast—“a freak”—Cole now lives his dream of being carried on the shoulders of his classmates, “celebrating his uniqueness and their common victory” (Nipp 278). Even though his classmates do not know what Cole’s gift is, they respect his newfound confidence and, on some level, recognize his uniqueness—and Malcolm proudly witnesses Cole’s triumph.

It is significant that Malcolm moves from being a detached therapist treating a troubled child to a father figure who believes in the gifts of his “son.” In an interview, Shyamalan revealed that he believed the film was about parenting. “It just happened to be wrapped in a ghost story” (*Unbreakable* 56). Both Vincent and Cole were abandoned by their fathers—which may contribute to their difficulties in shouldering their gifts; Crowe must move from a professional to an intimate relationship with Cole to succeed with both of them.

It may seem strange that Shyamalan categorizes *The Sixth Sense* as a film about parenting, when Malcolm is the only protagonist in this trio of films who is not a father. However, this is in keeping with the revision of contemporary masculine morality offered by Larry May, who in his 1998 analysis posits fatherhood as key to a more progressive masculinity. He advocates separating the concepts of “fatherhood” and “paternity,” and promoting a fatherhood that is, like the term “mothering,” connected to actions rather than circumstances: “True fatherhood should attach only to those men who have taken their relationships with mother and child seriously. By ‘true fatherhood’ I mean the condition of being in a caring relationship with one’s children through which one nurtures, supports

and educates them . . . It is an *accomplishment*, not a simple matter of biological fact” (30, italics mine). In keeping with this contemporary paradigm, it is Malcolm’s accomplishment as a father figure—not just as a psychiatrist—that allows him finally to connect with his wife.

BREAKING THE HERO MOLD: *UNBREAKABLE*

In describing his film *Unbreakable*, Shyamalan defines it as the first act of a standard comic book hero story—the film’s narrative focuses solely on the hero’s initial discovery of his gifts, ending before the superhero’s move into the public realm of fighting the ultimate bad guy that would occur in the narrative’s second and third acts. According to his comments on the *Unbreakable* DVD (Deluxe Edition), as he began to write a more traditional tale, Shyamalan found that the last two acts just didn’t interest him. He deliberately excised the extroverted arc of the traditional superhero narrative to expand the introverted story, the more personal one.

The married superhero is a rare figure on screen. In *Spider-Man* (2002), Peter Parker (Tobey Maguire) resists Mary Jane (Kirsten Dunst), in *Superman II* (1980) Superman (Christopher Reeve) turns back time to undo his marriage to Lois Lane (Margot Kidder), and Batman gets a new “true love” in each film. However, in *Unbreakable*, David Dunn (Bruce Willis) is the opposite of these men—instead of distancing himself from love to pursue his gifts, David distances himself from his gifts to pursue and marry his love, Audrey (Robin Wright Penn). Unfortunately, this sacrifice proves as emotionally stultifying as Batman’s sundering of personal connections: David awakes every morning feeling an intense sadness that, over the years, has estranged him from his treasured wife and son, even though he is still living in the same house. Unlike 1990s films in which extraordinary men recommit to their families to save their souls, David must embrace his extraordinary abilities to lift the sadness from his home and himself. Shyamalan’s working title was *No Ordinary Man*—David Dunn’s most difficult quest is to admit that he is not ordinary and to accept his gifts. Importantly though, it is his son’s hero-worshipping of him that facilitates his recognition of his gifts and this recognition in turn helps invigorate and renew a failing marriage.

The catalyst that begins David’s journey home is a train derailment, which kills everyone on board except David. The train accident initially changes David less than it does others’ perception of him. Seeing his survival as a sign, his wife is willing to try to rekindle their relationship; and Elijah (Samuel L. Jackson), in prophet-like fashion, believes from the news coverage that David may be The One for whom he has been searching. Elijah’s initial, anonymous query, “Have you ever been sick?”

causes David truly to look at himself for the first time. After realizing that he can't even remember having had a cold, David visits Elijah with his son to hear Elijah's theory: comic books are reflections of the reality that extraordinary people live among us, and that there is a distinct possibility that David is such an extraordinary man. Though David is suspicious of Elijah's prophecy, David's son, Joseph (Spencer Treat Clark), is a believer.

Religious faith, particularly Catholicism, is an important subtext for Shyamalan's work. In a deleted scene, David turns to a priest to ask the meaning of his survival, before he turns to Elijah. The priest warns David that it is an egotistical and fruitless question to attach meaning to why one is taken and another is spared. Left in the film is that David finds Elijah's note immediately after leaving the memorial mass. Shyamalan also chose Old Testament names for his male characters: David, the King who had a troubled relationship with God; Joseph, the beloved son and seer; and Elijah, the great prophet and protector of the faith. These allusions may not be central to the film but they still resonate as signs that these characters are marked as extraordinary men.

David's denial of his gift causes as much misery for himself and his family as Cole's running away from his gift creates friction between him and his mother. Elijah believes that David's sadness is tied to David's avoidance of his gifts. The closest David has approached his destiny to date is his work as a university security guard, protecting people through his instinct for danger.

As Cole's faith is essential to Malcolm's reclamation, so too is Joseph's faith and love essential to David's salvation. David took the train to New York uncertain that his family still wanted him around but, after the accident, it is Joseph's love that claims him. Joseph starts sleeping in his father's bed and runs to greet David at the end of his day. They learn of David's untapped strength together as Joseph surreptitiously adds weight to his father's bench press: "I've never lifted that much," states David, to which Joseph responds, "Let's add some more." He takes pride in the gifts that David struggles against. When David downplays his abilities by claiming, "I'm just an ordinary man," Joseph screams, "Stop saying that!" Later, Joseph threatens to shoot his father to prove to David that he is truly unbreakable. Even though Joseph is disappointed that he does not have his father's abilities, his insistence on his father's gifts indicates that Joseph recognizes, as Elijah does, the value of extraordinary people in our lives—it gives the ordinary hope.

The one injury that presents a hole in Elijah's theory of David is the car accident that he experienced with his then-date Audrey that sidelined his college football career. Audrey explains to Elijah that, as a physical

therapist, she would never have been serious about David if he continued to play football—although she was in awe of his skill, she is disturbed by the sport's violence. Upon Elijah's prodding, David admits that only Audrey was injured in the accident. After the accident, he felt he couldn't risk losing Audrey again so he chose to be "ordinary" to be with her. Instead of losing Audrey, David lost himself, deliberately ignoring any aspect of himself that interfered with his alter-ego construction of himself as an "ordinary man." We are shown that, for love, David willfully forgot who he was, the joy of winning, and the fulfillment intrinsic in inspiring others.

Part of David's heroic nature is that he has focused more attention on the needs of others than on himself—which the film demonstrates is to his detriment. This is similar to the central irony of *The Sixth Sense*: Dr. Malcolm Crowe focuses all of his energy on helping the troubled boy Cole rather than reaching out to his own wife—and in the process fails to notice that he is actually dead. The mystery in *The Sixth Sense* may initially appear to be about solving Cole's strange behavior, but this is the McGuffin. The true case is the mystery of Malcolm Crowe, solving the circumstances that led to his own murder. In *The Sixth Sense*, Malcolm can only reconnect with his wife and comfort her after he truly understands himself. Similarly, in *Unbreakable*, David cannot fully come to life until he accepts all of who he is.

Significantly, in *Unbreakable*, for his first heroic act, David chooses to address a home invasion. Although David is too late to rescue the parents, he saves the daughters, reclaiming the home as he defeats the villain. Also key is that the young girls assist David. Earlier in the film, water was identified as David's kryptonite. After the villain throws David into the pool, the girls extend a pole to pull him out, rescuing their rescuer. After his heroic deed, David is able to return fully to his own home. Now that he knows who he is, he can reconcile with his wife, sharing his fears, if not his secret identity, with her.

This prioritizing of the home and the empowering of young girls likewise appears in *The Sixth Sense*. After Malcolm, like Elijah, diagnoses Cole's special gifts and counsels him to use them, Cole and Malcolm travel to the home of a ghost girl, where Cole recovers a message for her father that will save her sister's life and expel their lethal mother from the home. As Jessica Nipp writes, "Cole and Malcolm use their extraordinary gifts to help each other and to spread out the network of helping beyond themselves" (281). Malcolm, like David, does not merely help people, but empowers them to help themselves and others.

Malcolm is left with the pyrrhic victory of letting his wife learn how much she always meant to him, so that she can move forward with this

life and he can move forward with his death. David's parallel journey back to his wife is more fruitful: Audrey has made it clear that she is not interested in David's strength, but she is interested in his weakness. Early in the film, he confesses that he knew that their marriage was in trouble when he had a nightmare and didn't wake her to tell her. After his rescue, he goes to Audrey's bed and tells her, "I had a bad dream." "It's over now," she tells him. For the first time in years, David does not wake up sad because he knows who he is. He has learned to balance his extraordinary gifts with his ordinary desire for love.

David's quest ends with a quietly joyful breakfast at home. Joseph walks into the kitchen to see his parents intimately laughing as she cooks the eggs. David makes Joseph even happier by secretly sharing with him the front-page newspaper coverage of his exploits. In the denouement, David defeats the superhero with a handshake—holding Elijah's hand, he learns that Elijah is the mastermind who caused three accidents, including his train accident, just to find David. Elijah's quest was likewise to find himself; to know his place in the world, Elijah believed he needed to find his opposite. His bones are as fragile as David's are resilient; David protects while Elijah destroys. However, David defeats Elijah without violence: self-knowledge and empathy are the ultimate weapons that disarm the arch-villain and assure the hero's personal triumph so that he can go home to his wife and son.

ALIEN-ATED FATHERS: SIGNS

As important a theme as fatherhood has been in recent Hollywood films, the fatherhood test is particularly strong in recent space invasion films, including *Independence Day* (1996), *Mars Attacks!* (1996), *Armageddon* (1998), and, most recently, *War of the Worlds* (2005). However, the fathers in these films are very different than the priest-father Graham Hess (Mel Gibson) in *Signs*. In *Mars Attacks!*, the white fathers are short-sighted idiots who are killed through their own arrogance, while their children remain calm and survive. (However, estranged father Byron Jennings [Jim Brown] proves his right to return to his family in the District of Columbia by saving Tom Jones in Las Vegas.) In *Independence Day* and *Armageddon*, multiple fathers leave their homes and children behind, banding together to defeat the threat and redeem themselves in their children's eyes, with one father in each film paying the ultimate price by deliberately sacrificing himself to save the Earth.

Unlike the fathers in these films, Ray Ferrier (Tom Cruise) in *War of the Worlds* appears to focus his energy on protecting his children, with no interest in the "war." Prior to the attack, as a noncustodial father, Ray

barely goes through the motions with his children, taking them for his occasional weekend but not even bothering to pick up the phone to order takeout for them. After the attack, it is a no-brainer for Ray to abandon his “home” because it is an unhealthy place even for himself. He heads with his kids to his wife’s luxurious, suburban home in hopes of handing off his charges, but the “perfect” home likewise provides no comfort or protection. During their journey through a treacherous New England, Ray and his children fail to learn anything from each other—the best that can be said for Ray is that he manages to survive with half of his children, delivering his daughter to Grandma’s pristine brownstone in Boston. In Spielberg’s vision, fathers must be punished and humbly return to the shelter of the Greatest Generation.

Signs is a very different project from these alien invasion films, one that involves the “domestication of the science fiction genre . . . and the ensuing demystification of Gibson’s star persona” (DeAngelis). Instead of a father with almost no interest in his children, *Signs*’ Graham is intimately bound to his kids. The film opens with Graham’s reaction to his daughter (Abigail Breslin) Bo’s scream. His reaction shots are followed by the equally immediate reaction of his brother Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix), a former baseball player who has been filling in since his sister-in-law’s death. Bo is screaming in reaction to the crop circle in their cornfield, although she and her brother are totally composed by the time the adult men reach them. Instead of a public attack on a major U.S. city, the possibility of the space invasion is first experienced by children in their own backyard. Throughout the film, Graham and Merrill react specifically to the threat to their home, not the planet.

Unlike Willis’s pre-Shyamalan film roles, Mel Gibson’s film characters have rarely been fathers, despite his personal situation as the father of seven. When Gibson has played a father, in *Ransom* (1997), *The Patriot* (2000), and *What Women Want* (2000), he has been a distant father who endangers his children. DeAngelis sees *Signs* as part of Gibson’s deliberate move toward family and personal values in his films, which was continued by his work in *We Were Soldiers* (2002) and his direction of *The Passion of the Christ* (2004): “Graham Hess emerges as perhaps the most mature and upstanding citizen of the actor’s portfolio of personae.” While Shyamalan drew on elements of Willis’s film persona for *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable*, he deliberately worked against audience’s expectations of a Gibson hero.

The back story to *Signs* reveals that Graham’s intense focus on his home actually began before the opening of the film: after his wife’s death, Graham resigned his post as Episcopalian pastor, consecrating himself to his farm and his children, actively declining any duty to his greater

community. Several times in the film, his neighbors call him “Father,” a responsibility and title he rejects. With his compromised faith after his wife’s freak accident, he barely has the emotional energy to be a father to Bo and his son, Morgan (Rory Culkin), or a brother to Merrill.

Unlike the destructive masculinity of Ray in *War of the Worlds*, *Signs* is full of nurturing masculinity, as Graham, Merrill, and Morgan nurture and protect Bo and each other. The only female characters in this film are Graham’s wife, Colleen (Patricia Kalember), seen in flashbacks, and the sheriff (Cherry Jones). These are strong, pragmatic women: Colleen stoically faces her death, leaving behind advice for her family; Officer Paski likewise is a no-nonsense presence, who calmly deals with her duties, whether it is breaking the news to Graham of his wife’s mortal injuries or taking down Graham’s scattered report of the trespassing on his farm. Even the eccentric child Bo remains calm, despite her prophetic dreams and the loss of her mother.

The male characters, on the other hand, are more temperamental and vulnerable. Merrill may be an athlete, but even his minor-league records reveal his emotional nature. He has five home-run records *as well as* the strike-out record, because he swung at all pitches: “It felt wrong not to swing.” He is more of an artist than a jock, more interested in the expressive joy of swinging than in scoring. Ten-year-old Morgan is an intense older brother who kills the family dog to protect Bo, but who is also asthmatic. Graham may be attempting to play the patriarch, but Merrill has to coach him on how to scare prowlers away by shouting and cursing, which he does poorly. And when the time comes to decide how to face the aliens, Graham calls for a vote rather than unilaterally making a decision—Graham clearly is no Braveheart!

Yet Hess’s model of masculinity is not the problem; in fact, it is essential to the family surviving the alien threat *together*. Like a typical American family, they experience the crisis gathered around the television, watching coverage of crop circles in India, spaceships in Mexico, and aliens captured on a birthday party video in Brazil. Graham refuses to publicize the crop circle in his own backyard, keeping it a private affair. The alien expert that the family relies on is not a government scientist, but Morgan, who purchases a book on aliens and places an old baby monitor in the crop circle. As far as the Hesses are concerned, the alien invasion is a personal, not a public, event. The family members choose to barricade themselves in their home and wait out the aliens, rather than fleeing. As Morgan explains, “This is where we lived with Mom.” They refuse to abandon what means the most to them: their family and their home.

The crisis, however, that is the real threat to the family is internal, not external. Merrill is almost as frightened by his big brother's loss of faith as he is by the aliens. When Merrill turns to Graham for comfort, he asks sadly, "Can't you pretend you're like you used to be?" Graham responds with a pat speech about there being two kinds of people—those who see signs and miracles and those who believe we just get lucky. The first type believes that whatever happens, there will be someone looking out for them so they have hope, while the second type *knows* that they are alone. This speech momentarily comforts Merrill, as he affirms for himself that he is a "miracle man." Unfortunately, this comfort is marred by Graham's stated certainty that no one is looking out for us.

Graham can trace his move from a man of faith to a man who believes the world is governed only by random luck to his wife's cryptic last words to him. His belief throughout most of the movie is that her words contain no meaning or signs and were merely the product of misfiring neurons. Graham's lack of belief in God interferes with his loving commitment to his family. When Morgan wants to pray over their final family dinner, Graham adamantly refuses, spoiling the feast and bringing his family to tears by screaming, "I am not wasting one more minute on prayer!" Merrill later confronts Graham over this loss of faith, telling him, "There are things I can take and a couple of things I can't. One thing I can't take is when my older brother, who is everything I want to be, starts losing faith in things." Graham's personal crisis of faith is what truly threatens the Hess family.



Graham and the family

The ultimate defeat of the alien in their living room and the restoration of Graham's faith perfectly coincide, as it turns out Colleen's last words to her husband were actually clues to the aliens' weakness. This allows Graham finally to see the hand of God at work—if Colleen had not been killed and if Morgan did not have asthma, Morgan and the rest of the family might be dead. And, without the alien invasion, Graham and the neighbor who caused Colleen's death might never have healed. When Morgan asks, "Did someone save me?", Graham can now answer, "I think Someone did." The victory of the film is not the repulsion of the aliens—it is Graham's return to his God and his parishioners, while maintaining his newfound respect for the quiet wisdom of his own family. While other tales of attacks from space are about people coming together on a macro and micro level, the micro level is sufficient for Shyamalan.

Malcolm and Graham are doubting Thomases who, unlike their families, need proof to believe. Malcolm must hear the voices recorded while Vincent was "alone" in his office to believe Cole; Graham must see the aliens to believe the invasion is real and he must have his wife's words make sense to believe God is listening. We are shown by Shyamalan that they are blessed to finally believe—but *Signs* ultimately asks, as Graham should know from the story of Thomas, how much more blessed would they have been to have believed without proof?

CONCLUSION: SHYAMALAN'S REVISION OF MASCULINITY

Shyamalan is first and foremost an entertaining storyteller. But the tales of *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, and *Signs* are at the same time contemporary fables that address anxieties about the roles of men in contemporary culture. In Shyamalan's films, the generic tasks of solving the mystery, defeating the arch-villain, and saving the planet become the home-front hero's "back story." Their true quest is to save themselves and those they love, creating a sustainable and rewarding life sheltered within their own home. Shyamalan values both the hero and the home, understanding that they support each other. Without heroes, the home is less rich. Without home, the hero is less human.

Another important element of Shyamalan's fables is that they do not end "happily ever after"—while the protagonists and their families have grown, their stories are not over. Every day they must commit to their calling and to each other. Anna Crowe (Olivia Williams) must take comfort from her husband's accomplishments and his love, and move forward. Cole and his mother must face their individual challenges together each day. David will have to share with Audrey his gift and explain to her that, while football may have been violence for violence's sake, on rare occasions violence may

be necessary to protect others. And Graham and his family will need to relearn how to live with faith. There are no instant cures.

Shyamalan's films suggest not only that the path of the home-front hero is a healthier model of contemporary masculinity than that presented in 1980s supermacho action films but also that this ethic values the strength of women and children and the redemptive value of family. In addition, this is a quest that their audiences may emulate more easily than saving the world from terrorists or aliens. The renewed man that Shyamalan presents is neither the 1980s "sensitive man" nor the Robert Bly wild man, but a courageous man who puts self-knowledge and family first, who protects the home front as it protects him.

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REACHING OUT TO THE OTHER SIDE

PROBLEMATIC FAMILIES IN THE FILMS OF M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

ELIZABETH ROSEN

IN 2006, M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN BECAME ONE OF NUMEROUS celebrities to participate in the American Express “My life. My card” campaign. The print version of his advertisement contains a photo of the director and a list of his responses to implied questions, one of which reveals that his proudest moment is when he sees his “children overcome fear.” Yet the ad itself suggests a different attitude about the relationship between parents and children. The photo shows Shyamalan sitting at the foot of the bed of a little girl, an open picture book in his hand. He stares boldly at the camera while, at the far end of the bed, the child cowers in terror, the blanket pulled up to her eyes, keeping a watchful eye on the filmmaker. This image—and its imposition of physical and psychological distance between adult and child—is emblematic of the troubled adult-child relationships depicted in Shyamalan’s films.

Shyamalan’s films prompt a series of questions about families: Why is it that so many of Shyamalan’s cinematic families are missing a parent? Why is it that the surviving parents are so weirdly isolated, and sometimes just plain weird? Why is it that the relationship between adults and children are depicted as so tense and impenetrable? It is my contention that Shyamalan deliberately develops a parallel between the supernatural and the fraught relationship between parent and child. That is, unlike the traditional Victorian ghost story, which uses the supernatural event as a bridge between past and present to speak to the effect that our history

has on us, Shyamalan suggests instead—by using both traditional supernatural tropes such as ghosts and more recent pop-cultural ones such as aliens—that the supernatural is not a means to confront our past at all, but is instead a way of explaining the gaps between the living. In his films, the space between parent and child is depicted as a supernatural space rather than a liminal one. The filmmaker hints that the gap between adult and child is not occupied by a transitional space that the child will ultimately cross through to become an adult, but rather is an unbridgeable space more akin to that which separates the ghost from the living person: each may see the other, but ultimately neither entity fully occupies the space of the other's world.

Shyamalan thus works in the tradition of the etymologically obsessed Freud who analyzes the word *unheimlich* in his essay "The Uncanny." Whether consciously or not, the filmmaker, too, seems aware of the multivalence of the word in which there is a tension between what *home* should be, the center of family life, and that which is *not-of-the-home* (alternatively translated as "eerie" or "uncanny") (Freud 124). In Shyamalan's case, homes and families provide more than the narrative focus for his supernatural tales; they *are* the supernatural tale.

One of the purposes of this essay, then, is to examine the depiction of families in Shyamalan's movies in relation to Vivian Sobchak's argument in "Child/Alien/Father: Patriarchal Crisis and Generic Exchange," which posits that the figure of the child in horror movies incorporates "cultural difference, social transformation, and historical movement into a single and powerful figure" (7). Sobchak is interested in the "cultural meanings that the figure of the child narrativizes" in contemporary horror, science fiction, and family melodrama films, arguing that these meanings, which are different in each genre, are linked to the "crisis experienced by American bourgeois patriarchy since the late 1960s, and the related disintegration and transfiguration of the 'traditional' American bourgeois family" (7–8). Shyamalan's films, which straddle the horror and science fiction genres, can be seen as both contending with and extending Sobchak's theories, but what I want to argue here is that it is not the figure of the child who reflects cultural meaning in his films as much as it is the *relationship* between child and adult that does. Moreover, the cultural anxiety that these relationships reflect is significantly changed from the anxiety over a threatened patriarchy that Sobchak theorized twenty years ago.

Sobchak in her study notes how horror and science fiction films have reimagined both the "time and place of horror and anxiety," as well as the source of that horror and anxiety, as issuing from the American home, and cites as examples films such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Amityville*

Horror (1979), and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) (9). She argues that, starting in the late 1970s and in conjunction with social crises about a weakening patriarchy and the disintegration of nuclear families, these horror children transform from “an alien force which [threatens] both its immediate family and all adult authority that would keep it in its place” into “sympathetic victims whose special powers are justifiably provoked or venally abused” (12). Correspondingly, the metaphorical responsibility for the familial breakdown also moves from child to parent, but specifically to the father, the figure under assault by changes in the social ideas about masculinity and patriarchal power (13).

Much of this argument resonates with Shyamalan's films. The children of his movies, for instance, are clearly the terrorized, rather than the terrors. Moreover, in thinking about the missing or emotionally absent fathers in the three films that I will focus upon in this essay—*The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Unbreakable* (2000), and *Signs* (2002)—Sobchak's observation that contemporary horror films “[move] to single out Dad as the primary negative force in the middle-class family” (13) seems also to be on target.¹

In each of these films, however, there are parents accounted for, if not always present, and they exert a powerful counterpoint to the children's Otherness. The parents are no less Other. Indeed, it is the parents who are perhaps most alien, most disconnected, and most ghostly, and because they occupy this pivotal position within the films, Sobchak's argument for locating the child as the figure of horror is at least partially contested by Shyamalan's work in which the child is often the narrative focus through whom emotional and narrative climaxes are channeled. Yet those climaxes do not necessarily occur because of guidance from adult figures; usually they happen in spite of adult guidance. In Shyamalan's world, adults are as tenuous and unstable a presence as the ghosts and superheroes that populate the children's worldviews, and because they are such tenuous figures, they can hardly be the threat that Sobchak posits in her analysis of father figures in contemporary horror films.

THE SIXTH SENSE

In *The Sixth Sense*, it is an adult, Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), who literally is this ghostly figure. This is a piece of information that a first-time viewer will not have until the conclusion of the film, but, even before knowing that Malcolm is dead (and has been dead all along), viewers will note how distinctly separated and isolated the adults are from the child protagonist, Cole (Haley Joel Osment), around whom the story supposedly revolves. Whether literal or emotional, the gap or “space” between

Cole and the adults is an observable one. We see it in the fact that Cole is considered a freak by his peers and teachers, as well as in that he literally sees a world quite different from the one his mother (Toni Collette) and Malcolm, the surrogate father figure, see. In the school hallway, for instance, Cole sees the ghosts of the people who have been hanged on the spot centuries earlier, but when the camera shows us Malcolm's view of the same spot, there is nothing there. Similarly, in the final scene between Cole and his mother in which they are stuck in a traffic jam caused by an accident, Cole can see the ghost of the bicyclist who has been killed in the accident, but when we look through his mother's eyes at the same spot outside the window, it is clear that the mother sees nothing. They just don't see the same way.

Even when the adults acknowledge the world Cole occupies, they still are unable to enter or experience it. For Malcolm, this separation of worlds is due to the fact that, as Cole tells him, ghosts "only see what they want to see." Malcolm, though paradoxically appearing to occupy the same world as Cole (because Cole sees ghosts), cannot close the gap between himself and Cole since, by virtue of being a ghost, he is limited in his view of Cole's world because he only sees what he wants to see. Malcolm is thus unaware of and cannot actually experience Cole's world, which contains many, many ghosts.

This sense of inhabiting two separate and unbridgeable planes of existence is reinforced visually throughout the film. When Malcolm rushes to the church to talk to Cole, for instance, the boy is playing in the balcony and their conversation takes place with Malcolm on the ground floor and Cole above. This visual separation of child and adult is repeated in the cough syrup commercial in which the film's bully, Tommy (Trevor Morgan), appears. In the commercial, there is a shot of a boy standing at the foot of his sleeping parents' bed. There is something odd about this shot, and, upon closer inspection, it is because the shot appears as if it were (badly) accomplished with a blue screen. That is, there is a flatness, a two-dimensionality, to the image of the parents in their bed that suggests that they have been filmed separately and that the image has then been projected unto a blue screen, and the boy has been placed in front of this flat screen. Child and adults thus literally occupy two different planes of space (*on* the screen and *in front of* the screen), a spatial difference magnified by the fact that the child stands vertically in space while the adults lie horizontally in space, again occupying two different planes.² Moreover, the "blue-screen shot" seems visually to allude to another horror film, *Poltergeist* (1982), with its images of children sitting before the television screen. *Poltergeist* is a film that also posits "planes of being."

Poltergeist ultimately has a more hopeful view of these alternative levels and suggests that adults and children can cross through these spaces successfully to help one another, whereas Shyamalan's films suggest that there is no space that can be bridged successfully by children and adults. But the object that separates child and adult in *Poltergeist*, the television, is of great interest here since it is the first of many new technologies that are taking children away from parents. Because it is one of the first of these technologies, however, *Poltergeist* posits that the parent-child relationship can still overcome its (literal) interference. Shyamalan's films reflect the opposite cultural fear: that our children now live in such a different world from adults that there is no way to close the gap.

That inability to close the gap is, in *The Sixth Sense*, reinforced by the film's persistent focus on the failure of Cole and the adults to communicate with each other. The gap between them is highlighted by the fact that neither child nor adult can imagine what the other is thinking. Three times this lack of understanding is foregrounded. Twice Cole asks his mother what she is thinking, and twice he guesses incorrectly. Both times, her response is "Look at my face." But it is precisely *because* Cole can't read her expression that he must ask her what she is thinking. In fact, looking is rejected as a way of knowing or bridging difference, with Cole repeatedly telling adults to stop looking at him or turning his own face away from them.³ The director makes the failure to build this bridge explicit when Malcolm plays a game with Cole in which he pretends to read the boy's mind. The object of this game is to get Cole to join him in the living room, that is, to share the same space. But, in fact, Malcolm "misreads" Cole enough that the boy poses a question of his own: "What am I thinking now?" When Malcolm admits he can't tell, Cole rightfully perceives that they share no common language or understanding and leaves the hallway, a leave-taking that highlights the fact that he never actually shared the same space with Malcolm to begin with.⁴ The inability to make oneself known to or to understand each other is emphasized in the climactic scene in Cole's story when the child tells his mother, "I'm ready to communicate with you now." Since the mother has been pleading with Cole throughout the entire film to talk to her about what's wrong, this would seem to be a moment arguing that the space between adult and child *can* be bridged. Yet even as he is able to convince his mother of the veracity of his claim to see ghosts, she is unable to see the ghost outside his window, suggesting that the two don't, and will never be able to, see the same way.

Moreover, right after this scene, Malcolm and the audience learn that Malcolm is actually a ghost and that we have only been able to see him

because we have been given Cole's privileged point of view, which includes the ghostly. Malcolm, then, doubly exemplifies the inability of adults and children to tap into each other's world. As the living *adult*, Malcolm is fundamentally an example of how children and adults cannot connect since, as a psychologist, he fails the child, Vincent (Donnie Wahlberg), who depended on him—a failure that results in his becoming a specter and quite literally leaving the world of these wounded children. Katherine A. Fowkes has suggested that Malcolm's professional world is also fundamentally at odds with Cole's supernatural one. The latter attributes events to the supernatural outer space and the former looks for explanations in the psychological inner space, and these worlds, too, cannot be bridged; one either believes the one or the other (195). As a *ghost*, Malcolm is also ultimately unknowable and untouchable because he is, as Jeffrey Weinstock has noted of other literary ghosts, "neither fully present nor absent, neither living nor dead" (6–7). Furthermore, the sudden reassessment and reassignment of this adult figure as "not of this world" implies that all adults may be similarly ghostly to the children in their lives and that the adults may not realize it because "they only see what they want to see," a point that is driven home by the twist ending, which is made possible only because we, the viewers, only see what we want to see.

UNBREAKABLE

The motif of an adult/parent figure who is literally not one of us is repeated in *Unbreakable* where Bruce Willis again plays the father, David Dunn. In an *oeuvre* marked by odd children, Joseph (Spenser Treat Clark), the child of this film, is perhaps Shyamalan's most disturbing creation, and if ever Sobchak's child-as-terrorizer appeared in a Shyamalan film, it is in this very spooky little boy who twice deliberately acts in ways that might kill his father. Joseph is distraught by his parents' marital troubles and is desperately trying to hold onto a father he perceives as slipping away, a fear made explicit in the numerous scenes in which Joseph physically holds onto David. In one scene, the pair is shown in bed together with the sleeping boy's arms so tightly locked around his wakeful father that David actually has trouble extricating himself from his son's grip. But it is exactly this extrication that enacts the separation of parent-child figures in Shyamalan's films for which I am arguing. This is not the only time that David is shown freeing himself from his son's grip. In fact, the film opens on just such an image.

No Shyamalan parent-child relationship is more distant and strained than the one between David and Joseph.⁵ Their interactions are filled with uneasy silences, angry words, and both emotional and physical

distance. This distance is made tangible in the numerous shots of David and his son at the kitchen table where Joseph is always pictured sitting at a remove from his father, and from his mother, too, when she is included. David is the most unloving of Shyamalan's film parents, telling the school nurse, for instance, that it is his wife who handles "Joseph stuff." Audrey Dunn (Robin Wright Penn) is only marginally better. While she never appears angry at her son the way her husband rather inexplicably is, she is just as neglectful. In fact, both parents often appear to act as though their son isn't there at all, and this is exactly the point: he isn't much of a part of their world.

Joseph only emerges from this ghostly existence when he points a gun at his father and threatens to shoot him to prove that David has superpowers. The horror for us as viewers is that his parents are utterly unable to convince him of a fact that he should know very well: that shooting his father will kill him. Though the scene seems to express the same threatened patriarchy that Sobchak notes in films where the "central and problematic presence" of a child figures dramatically in "a contemporary patriarchy under assault" (16), it is really a manifestation of a massive failure in communication between adult and child. But *why* doesn't Joseph know that shooting his father will kill him? Since Joseph's spookiness extends directly from this lack of understanding, the question is a vital one. I want to posit that Joseph, a child growing up in the age of video technologies where when you do shoot someone, he *isn't* dead, is exactly



Joseph threatens to shoot his father

what we, as adults, fear children are becoming. That is, they occupy a world so completely unlike the one adults grew up in that children are literally becoming incomprehensible in their behavior and thoughts.

Joseph's utter conviction about David's difference is evidence of how the children in Shyamalan's films already seem aware of the fact that they and their parents occupy entirely different worlds that cannot be bridged. And Joseph is right, both metaphorically and literally: physically, David isn't one of us, but emotionally, David is also at a remove from his child. The possibility of his physically leaving the child's life is made explicit in the gun scene where Joseph is only convinced not to shoot because David threatens to leave him if he pulls the trigger.

The divide between parent and child is given voice in this scene, as well, when David says to Joseph, "I thought we were just starting to be friends for real." The line of dialogue hints at some devastating breach that exists between the pair prior to the start of the film, but Shyamalan never explains what this event, which clearly has upended the normal trust between child and parent, might be.⁶ What the dialogue does suggest, however, is that the distance between parent and child is present in a very real way even before the question of David's superhero powers comes up.

As in *The Sixth Sense*, the distance that separates child from adult is reinforced by the camera work. During the particularly tense scenes set around the kitchen table, traditionally the site of family gatherings, the camera never shows both father and son in the same frame. At best, we might see a piece of one character intruding into a frame that is focused on the other character, as we do when we see Joseph's arm pointing the gun at his father. While the camera pans back and forth between Joseph, David, and Audrey, there is no frame that holds them all.⁷ This separation is enacted again in the later scene in which David slides a newspaper with the revelatory story confirming his superpowers across the table to his child. Because David is literally reaching out to his son, his hand lingering as he waits for Joseph to comprehend, we might assume that this is a moment in which the space between adult and child is actually being bridged. But, in fact, the camera work suggests otherwise. Not only does David withdraw his hand from the paper and thus not even make mediated physical contact with Joseph, but the camera continues to emphasize each character's isolation by constantly panning from one to the other without ever putting them in the same frame.⁸

As in the previous film, the different worlds occupied by child and adult are implied visually, as well as thematically—this time through the use of an inverted shot. As *Unbreakable* opens, we see David on a train, but he is being viewed through the gap in the seats in front of him by a little girl who

is hanging upside down. Child and adult thus literally see the world differently. This inverted viewpoint is even more extreme the next time it is used, when Joseph is upside down on the couch watching TV.⁹

SIGNS

In *Signs*, Shyamalan relies not on the camera to establish this difference but the actors themselves. Shyamalan's films contain numerous shots of parents gazing on children or vice versa, and such scenes are notable largely because the lack of expression that characterizes the gazer, whether child or adult, seems to signal the unknowability of the gazed-upon.¹⁰ In *Signs*, Shyamalan consistently brings the camera back to rest on the face of parent Graham Hess (Mel Gibson) as he observes, and sometimes even blatantly stares at, his children. Graham's gaze, while sometimes a cipher, clearly expresses the strangeness with which he regards his children, Bo (Abigail Breslin) and Morgan (Rory Culkin). What Gibson and Shyamalan allow us to read in Graham's expression is his sense of the children being alien and Other. Thus, *Signs'* aliens from outer space are a manifestation of an inner-space problem: the alien-ness of child to parent and parent to child.

A particularly good example of this analogous relationship comes early in the film when Graham puts his daughter, Bo, back to sleep. As they both sit on her bed, there is a long moment when the camera focuses on Graham just staring at his child as though trying to figure out what she is exactly. This inability to figure her out is punctuated by the same question that beleaguers the characters of *The Sixth Sense*: "What are you thinking about?" But if Graham can't figure out what his child is, Shyamalan knows: he has Graham glance up from the daughter to see an alien standing on the roof across from the bedroom.

This conflation of child/alien is seen again later when Morgan is being held captive in the arms of the alien who invades the house. Shyamalan steps out of the logic of his own story to make the analogous relationship between child and alien explicit. Earlier, we've been told that the aliens are master chameleons, that they take on the color and pattern of their surroundings, and we see an example of this in this scene when the alien's hand, lying against Morgan's shirt, has taken on the color and pattern of it. But then Shyamalan breaks his own rules when the alien turns around and we see *reflected* in its back the screaming face of Bo. Since we've been told that the aliens adopt the coloring of the background in order to make themselves invisible (not that they reflect what's *in front* of them, which would make them visible), we can only suppose that the director wants us to pay attention to the implications of this break in the logic. And the

implication is that the child is part of, or the same as, the alien, and that the figure of the alien is a literal reflection of the child.

But even given this more traditional figuring of the child as Other, one can't discount that the parent is "monstrous," also. Graham is a horror, a father who is distant and refuses to comfort the children who have lost their mother and has abdicated both his faith and his role as a parent—an abdication so awful that Morgan treacherously wishes that his Uncle Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix) were his father instead. But where Sobchak sees horror film fathers as "[playing] out the rage of a paternity denied the economic and political benefits of patriarchal power" *against* their children, Shyamalan's fathers aren't after their kids (14). Indeed, they are unable to get at (or even just plain *get*) their children. Even metaphorically reading him, it seems clear that Graham doesn't intend to be a monster to his children. Instead, Shyamalan seems to be alluding to a famous horror film again, for Graham is much like a pod person from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). His shell is there, but everything that once defined him as a father/Father has disappeared with his wife's (played by Patricia Kalember) death. The rigid, blank-faced pod-person who refuses to comfort them is as alien and monstrous to Bo and Morgan as the real space invaders are. And part of this alien-ness is the way their father looks at them as though he doesn't know them any longer.

Hence, the mother's dying injunction to Graham "to *see*" is, while incomprehensible to Graham himself, absolutely logical within the structure of the narrative. The film is filled with the parent Graham trying to see his own children, and only seeing "aliens" instead.¹¹ What is suggested more subtly in *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* is here made more explicit: children and adults are from two different planets.

But like those other films, *Signs* is rife with instances that support this subtext of difference, whether through visual manifestations of the lack of connection between them such as we find in the repeated motif of Graham forcibly turning Morgan's face toward him to speak to him, and to which Morgan responds by turning his father's face *away* from him, or through the implied obstacle to communication, the dead mother, a ghostly adult figure who consistently, if metaphorically, hovers in the presence of the children, but with whom no real contact is possible. It's no coincidence that the story Graham uses to try to connect with his son is one that both involves this unreachable parent figure and is also about how Morgan's birth almost killed her, thus permanently separating them.¹² And even as the kneeling Graham tells this story to Morgan, Shyamalan never lets them close the literal space between them, but keeps

both the locked front door and the hazy figures of Uncle Merrill and Bo between them in the background.¹³

Thus, even in the moments where child and parent appear to be connecting, we find the director undermining this intimacy through his staging. Locked in the cellar, Morgan suffers a terrible asthma attack and Graham desperately gathers the child to him, holding the boy in his lap and coaching him, "Breathe like me. We're the same." But, of course, they aren't the same and Shyamalan undermines Graham's wishful thinking by having the pair sitting back-to-front so that they both stare straight ahead into the darkness of the cellar and still never look at each other. During this scene, Graham's hand often hovers over the boy's chest, rather than rubs it, a gesture that is simultaneously full of fear about doing anything that might make it harder for Morgan to breathe at the same time that it suggests an inability to touch and connect with the child.

The same idea is expressed in the staging of the penultimate scene in which Morgan is revived by Graham. The wildly swinging camera that Shyamalan favored for adult-child scenes in *Unbreakable* is back again, panning frantically between the unconscious Morgan, his praying father, the crying sister, and the pacing, distraught uncle. Just as in *Unbreakable*, we are never given a frame that contains both father and son—and this in spite of the fact that Graham is actually holding his child in his lap. Also notable is that, while praying over his prostrate child, Graham *still* won't look at him but keeps his face turned away and his eyes screwed shut. Even when Morgan does revive, the camera goes not to Graham's reaction shot, but to Merrill's and Bo's, and then, when it does swing back to Graham, the father is so overcome that he can barely look at his child.

Indeed, Shyamalan ends this film with the parent-child separation still intact, with the solitary Graham, now back in his reverend's collar, in his bedroom as the happy laughter of his children floats up to him from downstairs. The wall behind him is now filled with photos of the family. But in ending on this image in which the children are still at a remove from the parent, present only through secondhand photo evidence and the dreamy laughter from outside the frame, Shyamalan is able to maintain the suggestion that this problem of child and adult not occupying the same space has yet to be resolved. Indeed, the ghostly laughter of the kids *somewhere else* once again sends the viewer to Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* in which the simultaneous presence and absence of the child Carol Anne (Heather O'Rourke) is indicated by her ghostly laughter coming from some other spiritual plane of existence.

CONCLUSION

Given his film preoccupations, it's perhaps not surprising that Shyamalan's American Express advertisement also associates family members with supernatural Others, not merely through the literal space that separates child and director, but also because he writes that his inspiration comes from "the three black-haired angels that live in [his] house," thus implying that these "angels" are his children.¹⁴ The ad, then, continues this director's tradition of implying a fundamentally problematic and ambivalent relationship between children and their parents. After all, it is not as if Shyamalan contests the centrality of children in adults' lives. Nor does he contest how important parents are to their children. Indeed, his movies are largely about both the need for and the attempt to bridge the space that exists between parents and children. The abandonment by Cole's father, the threatened abandonment of Joseph's, and the loss of Morgan and Bo's mother are deeply, deeply felt and scarring, both for the surviving parents and the children involved. Conversely, a great deal of the parents' time and effort in these films is given over to their children, whether to try to understand them, stop their unhappiness, or save them from harm.

In writing about how horror films resonate with the anxieties of the cultures that produce them, Kendall Phillips posits that these films provide an important cultural service by "[providing] a space for reflecting on" these anxieties (9). My argument here is that Shyamalan's films are tapping into a real cultural anxiety, one that has been steadily growing since the 1970s when, says Sobchak, horror films reflected anxiety over a declining patriarchal society. The figurative space that Shyamalan suggests separates parents and children reflects a real gulf between generations, a gulf that has been widening as technological innovation has moved faster, and that seems to have hit a critical point with the personal computer and communication technologies that define the lives of children now. Baby boomers may be responsible for the initial wave of computer technology, but even they couldn't have anticipated the kind of technological environment their children, now grandchildren, would effortlessly and unthinkingly surf. Today's children are "plugged in" in ways that adults can barely comprehend, and if ever an emblematic piece of evidence for this argument existed, it would surely be the fact that kids are now carrying cell phones whose ringtones are pitched at exactly the tones that adults physically *can't* hear, though children can. Could the adult-child inability to communicate be manifested any more directly?

It's not merely the delivery systems that differ so enormously between generations, but also the substance that is being delivered. For children

today, raised in a world where Britney Spears or Tiger Woods get as much news coverage as congressional debates about war or the economy, substance often *is* surface. They know, even if the adults around them have trouble comprehending it, that image is everything and there's no substance so dumb or unpopular that it can't be "spun." At the same time, this generation of children is living in a virtual world of which adults are largely unaware. Avatars, chat rooms, online personas in MySpace or Facebook, text messages, YouTube—all of these outlets allow kids to create alternative lives from the ones their parents see. This second existence that many kids live away from the watchful gaze of their parents *is* completely Other to the unsuspecting adults who surround them. For these children and their parents, Shyamalan's oft-repeated concern about the failure of *looking* as a way of knowing and understanding is a very real one, since what adults "see" may in no way reveal the Other who is lurking behind the faces that their children present to them. His films, then, reflect an anxiety about a technological and cultural gap that has, since the 1980s, widened so enormously that parents literally do live in a different world from the children they are raising. The issue of being able to bridge this gap and communicate to our children is a relevant and anxiety-provoking one, and one of the reasons why *Unbreakable's* Joseph, who is operating on a video game-influenced paradigm, is our nightmare child and ghostly adult Malcolm's predicament of "only seeing what he wants to see" is so troubling.

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NOTES

1. I think it's no coincidence that the children in these films, at least the active children, are little boys, and the adult figures with whom they both strive and attempt to connect are adult males, usually their fathers. For a specifically psychoanalytical examination of the boy-father relationship in *The Sixth Sense*, see Laurence A. Rickels 2002.
2. Part of this flatness is that Cole *is* watching a flat screen (the TV) and *we* are watching one, too (the movie screen). But these layers of watching reinforce our positions as observers of each others' worlds, rather than inhabitants of them.
3. In the longer version of the scene in which Malcolm first observes Cole, Cole tells Malcolm to stop looking at him. This scene was edited out of the cinematic release but is available in the extras on the DVD. Cole also tells his teacher to stop looking at him. The most notable instances of Cole turning his face away occur when Malcolm says something that indicates how little understanding he has of Cole, specifically when Malcolm says that he's not supposed to talk to Cole about why he, himself, is sad, and later in the scene once Cole has revealed his secret but Malcolm doesn't believe him.
4. In Vincent's (Donnie Wahlberg) accusation of Malcolm that "You don't know so many things," we can hear the same idea being propounded—that Malcolm just doesn't *get* that Vincent occupies a different world from him.
5. The biblical provenance of both David and Joseph's names is suggestive. The allusion to the David and Goliath story is appropriate for the superhero element of David Dunn's story, of course, but more interesting is the choice of Joseph's name, which sends us to one of the most famous sons of the Bible, the favored son who is given a coat of many colors by his father and is consequently sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. What intrigues me here is that the biblical Joseph is forcibly separated from the father he adores, and when they are finally reunited, Joseph has become such a powerful person in Egypt that he can never again be in the world of the sheep-herder father.
6. Kendall R. Phillips notes that this dependence of children and adolescents on the adults around them, and the failure of the adults to help them, is one of the underlying themes and sources of horror in the horror genre (2005, 2).
7. The exception to this is when David takes the gun from his son and all three characters sink to the floor: the child in despair, the adults in relief. This frame does contain all three of them, but they are all so clearly removed from one another, occupying opposite corners of the kitchen, that I would argue that Shyamalan maintains the space between them.
8. Indeed, he barely makes verbal contact; he mostly mouths the words "you were right" to his son.
9. This is Shyamalan playing one of his jokes on the viewer; the viewer at first assumes that David has been killed or hurt in the train wreck that Joseph is watching, an event that would certainly turn Joseph's world "upside down," but almost immediately we learn that David is unharmed and so we are forced to reappraise this shot of Joseph watching the news upside down. The shot makes

sense, however, if we think of it as indicating the extremely different worldviews that children have from those of adults. There is a notable exception to this and it comes when we get Elijah's (Samuel L. Jackson) view of the man with the gun disappearing into the subway. Elijah also watches from his position upside down on the subway stairs where he has fallen, but I would argue that, because Elijah is the super-villain to David's superhero, it's made quite clear that he, too, is literally unlike the rest of us, and that therefore the meaning of the inverted shot remains the same.

10. Extending this analysis to Shyamalan's more recent films, while neither *The Village* nor *Lady in the Water* revolve around a child, they do revolve around childlike characters, and this blank gaze is sometimes enacted by these characters. In *Lady in the Water*, Story (Bryce Dallas Howard), the childlike mermaid, is both literally from another world and (ironically given her name) is "difficult to read" because of her lack of expression. In *The Village*, Noah (Adrien Brody) is the childlike character who is unknowable because of his mental disability and who becomes a literal manifestation of an otherworldly creature by pretending to be one of "those we do not speak of."
11. This pun on seeing is extended to other senses in this film, as well. Early in the film, there is an extended closeup of Graham rising suddenly to his feet from examining the corn field and staring blankly into space. When Officer Paski (Cherry Jones) asks Graham what is wrong, he tells her, "I don't hear my children."
12. That the mother is unreachable is a point made in the conversation where Bo asks her father why he sometimes still talks to her mother. When she asks him if her mother ever answers him, he tells her no, and then she says, "She never answers me, either."
13. The hazy figures who hover in the background between Graham and Morgan thus function to remind the audience that other ghostly figures, namely the mother, stand between father and son.
14. The longer version of the advertisement makes this implied analogy even more strongly, since in it he refers to his family a total of five times before the angel comment, two of those times explicitly mentioning his children. Having thus firmly established Shyamalan as a family man, when we get to the inspiration comment in the longer version of the ad, we are even more likely to hear in the trope of the "angel," the metaphor for his children. In fact, Shyamalan only has two children, so it's likely that the "three black-haired angels" he refers to aren't metaphoric at all. Nonetheless, the casual viewer of these ads would have no way of knowing how many children Shyamalan actually has, so would likely read the angel comment as a metaphor anyway.

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CHAPTER 3

MELODRAMA AND MALE CRISIS IN *SIGNS* AND *UNBREAKABLE*

R. BARTON PALMER

SEEMING AND BEING, ONE AND THE SAME

THOUGH HE IS BEST KNOWN TO MOVIEGOERS AS A fantasist, melodrama is the time-honored genre that underlies, in one form or another, all the films M. Night Shyamalan has released thus far. Following the popular view, critics, however, have thus far largely focused on Shyamalan's intriguing engagement with supernatural, metaphysical, or religious themes.¹ No doubt, the director's proficient audacity in dealing with such subject matter has had much to do with the substantial reputation he has gained as an intriguing fabulist, whose special talent is the unpredictable final plot twist. But Shyamalan's narratives are also deeply generic in their focus on the restoration of dysfunctional family (and sometimes communal) relationships. In embracing such Capra-esque themes, he displays none of the interest that other directors of his generation have shown during the past decade and a half in evoking what we might call the after-scene of melodrama, that locus of alienation deeply marked by the failure to find and maintain some meaningful connection to others. Instead, Shyamalan, particularly in his first five films, has crafted narratives that move through deep crisis, personal and familial, to endorse traditional institutions and gender roles.

Arguably, such cultural optimism is what most distinguishes Shyamalan's filmmaking from that of other independent filmmakers. In most contemporary melodramas, such as Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* (2005) or Todd Haynes's *Far from Heaven* (2002), what prevails is a numbed sadness at the failure of individual reformation. Here characters also find frustrated

their (often inchoate) desire for a satisfying social order. Even though dissatisfaction may prompt them to go beyond the limits they had previously set on experience, they never discover a *moyen de vivre* that answers to all of their deepest needs. Failed narratives of self-discovery return these loners to oppressive feelings of disappointment or guilt, as the family, if it can be constituted at all, proves unable to provide comfort and security.

Broken Flowers draws an unforgettable portrait of an emotionally rootless narcissist (Bill Murray), a perpetual adolescent who, having renounced the responsibilities of family life, discovers in late middle age that he might have a son whose identity he cannot through his best efforts determine, so multifarious and toxic have been the romantic relationships he thoughtlessly pursued when younger. For Jarmusch, the individual quest to recover the past thus reveals only the dead-endedness of that male commitment to noncommitment encouraged by the sexual revolution. *Broken Flowers* strains the basic framework of melodrama by suggesting the ultimate unknowability of who we are, and, most importantly, the unlikeliness (given the decoupling of sexual relations from parenting) of determining who “belongs” to us. Excavating the cinematic and cultural past, *Far from Heaven* dramatizes how “unconventional” desire (though it demands expression) cannot be meaningfully accommodated within the rigid gender and sexual categories of that archly conservative America of a half century ago. Haynes’s upper-middle-class white characters—the agonized homosexual husband (Dennis Quaid) who most reluctantly deserts his children to live another kind of life, whose contours are still to be determined, and the betrayed wife (Julianne Moore) who finds herself deeply drawn to the “Negro” gardener (Dennis Haysbert)—find themselves pushed from social prominence to marginality.

Interestingly, though products of New Hollywood independent filmmaking, both *Far from Heaven* and *Broken Flowers* seem quite traditional when read within the history of the Hollywood family melodrama, which first flourished in the 1950s. These two films, and many similar contemporary productions, reverently recycle the tragic dynamic that critic Thomas Elsaesser identifies as a major feature of the genre, particularly as it took shape in the now-celebrated films of Douglas Sirk, to whom Haynes pays an extended homage. In *Broken Flowers* and *Far from Heaven*, the pathos so important to Hollywood filmmaking in general (both the emotions portrayed in the world of the story and the feelings they arouse in viewers) are deployed toward anatomizing what Elsaesser identifies as “the contradictions of American civilization.” The action of such dramas results in characters being “constantly dazzled and amazed.” Such puzzlement strikes at the heart of individual and social experience:

“The discrepancy of seeming and being, of intention and result, registers as a perplexing frustration, and an ever-increasing gap opens between the emotions and the reality they seek to reach. What strikes one as the true pathos is the very mediocrity of the human beings involved, putting such high demands upon themselves trying to live up to an exalted vision of man, but instead living out the impossible contradictions that have turned the American dream into its proverbial nightmare” (67).

Melodramas of this type are thus not only “critical social documents but genuine tragedies. . . . They record some of the agonies that have accompanied the demise of the ‘affirmative culture,’” that pervasive social phenomenon Elsaesser sees as a major development in the postwar era (67–68).

SWINGING AWAY

Shyamalan’s cinema, in contrast, strongly supports the therapeutic trajectories of affirmative culture—that collective search, as sociologist Christopher Lasch somewhat ironically puts it, for “the momentary illusion of personal well-being, health, and psychic security” (7). In the terms suggested by Elsaesser, the narratives of Shyamalan’s films close the gap that opens up between seeming and being. Viewed from the perspective of the history of family melodrama, his filmmaking is thus more untraditional than the practice of his Indiewood fellows, even though Shyamalan, because he is devoted to a personal, even idiosyncratic, cinema that runs counter to mainstream production trends, otherwise shares much in common with them. His first five films dramatize movements of consciousness: the recovery of religious faith (*Wide Awake* [1998], *Signs* [2002]); the deep healing afforded by the talking cure (*The Sixth Sense* [1999]); the exploration of hitherto repressed physical and moral potential (*Unbreakable* [2000]); and the communal restoration effected by a solitary penitential journey (*The Village* [2004]). In each case, Shyamalan’s protagonists are delivered by struggle and suffering to their authentic selves, while they reassume their traditional roles within both the family and the larger society.

Shyamalan’s cultural conservatism contrasts with the pessimism of Haynes and Jarmusch (and of contemporary independent filmmakers more generally), whose cinemas in important ways further the socially critical project undertaken by prominent Hollywood auteurs in the 1970s. But he does share with his contemporaries an irresistible impulse to engage with the cultural and cinematic past, which he attempts in some ways to rewrite. Of his films released thus far, *Signs* and *Unbreakable* demonstrate most clearly and forcefully how Shyamalan contests the pervasive, perdurable influence of 1970s filmmakers (most notably Martin Scorsese, Stanley

Kubrick, Francis Ford Coppola, and Robert Altman), many of whose films, like his own, center on the dramatization of male crisis.

Coming into cultural focus, perhaps surprisingly, during the heady first decade of second stage feminism, male crisis has become one of the great subjects of the American cinema in the past forty years, and it is a subject that Shyamalan, from his debut work, *Wide Awake*, and first commercial success, *The Sixth Sense*, has demonstrated he would like to claim as his own.² Doing so has meant, in part, reconstructing the narrative of male crisis that 1970s auteurs made a conventional part of the American film scene—in particular by providing their characteristic narratives of angst, anomie, and spiritual longing with unusual therapeutic trajectories that invoke transcendent forces: supernatural, otherworldly, and metaphysical. His cinema, in fact, can be understood as a startling revision of the masculinist preoccupations of 1970s cinema. In *Signs* and, especially, *Unbreakable*, this revisionism connects to the idiosyncratic social conservatism of the postfeminist era, one of whose signal elements has been a rejection of those soft or impotent forms of masculinity so prominently on display in modernism generally and, more particularly, in “get in touch with your feminine side” varieties of male gender-bending.

As Robert Kolker has observed, the revered films of what some call the Hollywood Renaissance, while filled with a sense of “challenge and adventure” for their primarily male protagonists, more forcefully “speak to a continual impotence in the world, an inability to change and to create change” (10). Such films, Kolker continues, “when they do depict action, it is invariably performed by lone heroes in an enormously destructive and antisocial manner. . . . When they preach harmony, it is through the useless conventions of domestic containment and male redemption” (10). *Signs* is interesting in this regard because it expends much of its narrative and thematic energy on limning a similar fictional universe. Shyamalan’s original script centers on an angry man, a widower with three children to raise who is embittered by the absence of any transcendent moral framework that might render action meaningful. Yet that is only the film’s point of departure. This metaphysical emptiness is eventually revealed as a mirage. In short, Shyamalan only invokes, in order to more convincingly dismiss, the vaguely existentialist crisis that pervades those 1970s masterpieces Kolker aptly characterizes as a “cinema of loneliness” (11).

The protagonist of *Signs*, Graham Hess (Mel Gibson), seems drawn with equal doses of Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Graham Greene. Hess is an apostate Episcopal priest who avows a fierce hatred of God; like many Greene characters, he is a deeply spiritual man painfully trapped in a crisis of belief, suffering a bitter sense of estrangement from a God he is

certain has failed him. His wife, Colleen (Patricia Kalember), has perished horrifically after being struck by a neighbor's car (interestingly enough, this anguished man, Ray Reddy, is played by the director himself) and no one is to blame for the accident. Because of its randomness, improbability, and manifest injustice, this tragedy can read as either a sign of God's indifference or, perhaps, more darkly, malevolence. It may even be proof that God does not exist. Hess is too grief-stricken to decide among these despairing alternatives, but he takes no comfort from the various arguments offered traditionally in Christianity to explain why bad things happen to good people in a world that is supposedly ruled over by an omnipotent and providential deity. Hess's sense of estrangement becomes most obvious when he turns a deaf ear to parishioners who still think of him as their pastor. He seems unable to conceive that this self to which they respond was once his own, returning with a blank stare the still-respectful greetings of those in his community who find themselves in need of spiritual comfort or advice.

For Hess, the universe manifests no trace of intelligent design. Phenomena in their obtrusive randomness seem to defy any attempt at interpretation or understanding. His daughter, Bo (Abigail Breslin), inexplicably leaves half-full glasses of water around the house, while older son, Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix), has failed in a promising baseball career because he cannot hold back from swinging with all his might at every pitch. The asthma that afflicts his younger son, Morgan (Rory Culkin), is another source of anguish. Life seems filled with unmerited misfortune that seemingly gives the lie to the divine promise of protection for the innocent. What Hess has experienced also mocks the palpable lack of transcendent order. Perhaps such oddities reduce to absurdity the notion of free will itself, as Bo and Merrill find themselves helpless to explain or, more importantly, control their bizarre behaviors. Even love is seemingly ridiculed as, in her dying words, Colleen, like her world, seems to lapse inconsequentially into nonsense. "Swing away," she tells Graham with her last breath, an injunction that might as well be framed in another language for all it has to convey to her horrified husband at the time. Hess can only understand her remarks as generated by some random memory of Merrill's baseball career, called into consciousness by the faltering neural connections of her expiring brain.

With its moving portrayal of existential angst and loss of faith, and its emphasis on frustrated meaning-making, *Signs*, of course, connects to more general and enduring cultural concerns of the twentieth century that go beyond male crisis. The film offers a potent meditation on the angry modernism of the postwar era, an age preoccupied, as Hannah Arendt

has argued in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and elsewhere, by the problem of evil. Shyamalan approaches this larger ethical and metaphysical issue by tracing the experience of someone who has unwillingly become alienated from the society he continues to inhabit, as it were, from without. Like the antiheroes memorably evoked in Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*, a paean to the death of meaning in postwar culture, Hess is troubled by an unshakable "sense of strangeness, of unreality." He likewise "cannot live in the comfortable world of the bourgeois, accepting what he sees and touches as reality . . . what he sees is *essentially* chaos." After his wife's violent and seemingly pointless end, Hess cannot continue to accept that the world is "quite the same straightforward place" (15). Estrangement and a pervasive feeling of moral numbness become his spiritual condition. He has become the archetypal outsider, just going through the motions, mired in everydayness he can no longer embrace, dedicated to the consumption of his own poisonous emotions.

Hess, however, is soon engulfed in a larger struggle that forces him to fight for his own and his family's survival. Crop circles have been mysteriously appearing in their cornfields, and then, as they to their horror discover, all around the world. The arrival of a fleet of huge spaceships soon afterward makes clear that the circles are landing signals to direct a vast alien host. The comforting rhythm of family routine is shown to be a mystification. Exiting their spacecraft, predatory extraterrestrials now stalk the earth in search of human victims to "harvest," poisoning their victims with a gas their mouths emit. There seems little hope for mankind, left to its own resources to fight creatures that at first prove invincible. And so Hess seems correct in his view that God is absent, unconcerned, or nonexistent—that humans are indeed alone in the face of what is hostile to their existence. These developments, of course, do yield a grim hope: there is a metaphysical order. The crop circles are not inexplicable, but signs whose referent has been in due course revealed. Things do make sense, even if, with the revelation of apocalyptic threat, there is as yet still no hint of a Providence that might restore man to his traditional role as a privileged creation within the larger ambit of the created order.

With the extinction of the human race a seeming inevitability, the narrative takes a surprising turn, giving cause for hope. Besieged in their farmhouse where they are nearly overrun, the family cautiously emerges upon hearing on the radio that the aliens have given up the fight and are in retreat. But one of the creatures remains behind in their living room and seizes Morgan, then suffering an acute asthma attack. At this crucial moment, Graham thinks back to his wife's last words and realizes that her admonition to "swing away" was meant for Merrill, who now, on his

brother's instruction, takes up his baseball bat and flails away at the creature, allowing Morgan to be rescued. The alien is then easily finished off when Merrill realizes that water burns its flesh like acid. Bo's unfinished glasses of water, whose locations around the house are now revealed as strategic, provide the coup de grace.

And Morgan, though exposed to the alien's poison breath, emerges unscathed because his constricted lungs prevented him from inhaling the deadly vapors. In this series of unlikely events, which fit into a pattern that rational thought could hardly have anticipated, Hess sees the workings of Providence: the plan of a benevolent deity who, foreseeing and acting in accord with that foreknowledge, has made it possible for a father to save his family at a moment of deadly crisis. The narrative endorses and then transcends the paradox of a universe in which evil exists (the aliens bent on human destruction are no mirage) despite an all-powerful God who ultimately intends good for humankind. Father Hess puts his priestly collar back on, indicating that he has regained his faith, but also proclaiming that he is no longer the outsider mystified by the inexplicable. The natural order, its eccentricities and seemingly pointless tragedies suddenly readable, is now revealed as existing "for" Hess and his family. It is through interpretation that Hess becomes the traditional hero. His engaged imagination enables him, when the time comes, to recognize and then decode correctly the signs around him.

No doubt, the tale Shyamalan tells in *Signs* lacks the plausibility of effective science fiction. In fact, it is little more than a pale recycling of the alien invasion narrative invented by H. G. Wells in *The War of the Worlds*, melded to the space traveler's hypothesis, now discredited, that was floated in the 1970s by Erich von Däniken in his much discussed book *Chariots of the Gods*. Unlike his sources, Shyamalan shows little interest in exploring the intellectual territory usually mapped by science fiction. In fact, the film's story seems no more substantial than a disposable fable, whose melodramatic purpose is to demonstrate how a comforting certainty about the world and one's place in it might be achieved. Arguably, much the same might be said about *Unbreakable's* engagement with comic book superheroics. In this film also, the fable invites "reading through" to a melodramatic center.

SOME SORT OF CLEAR WATER

Signs forcefully distinguishes the Shyamalan *oeuvre* from the representational problematic of 1970s cinema, with its neomodernist evocation of a social universe from which meaning and value have fled and within which there seems no possibility of meaningful action. But *Signs* also stakes out a

traditional position in regard to gender politics. The film's finale emphasizes how the man wounded by experience is restored to a position of power and mastery (that of "father" in its two senses) and how his need is satisfied for a world in which his actions and virtue might make a difference. *Signs* can thus be read as offering an expansive treatment of male crisis, contextualizing it within the intellectual paradigms that indelibly define postwar western culture. In a culturally conservative fashion, the film champions the restoration of both religious faith, after first lamenting its abandonment, and also the authority of the father, after first anatomizing the patriarch's self-destructive decline.

Based on his original screenplay, Shyamalan's earlier film *Unbreakable* treats much the same themes, but dramatizes a less universal, less spiritual therapeutic trajectory. With its emphasis on male physicality (and the problems for gender politics that male strength might be seen as raising), this film speaks directly and with greater psychological insight to the growing self-doubts and halting self-redefinition that deeply marked the maturing process of many American men in the wake of second stage feminism. The film engages social issues whose most important cultural symbol is what critic Susan Jeffords calls the male "hard body," featured most prominently in the *Rambo* and *Rocky* franchises during the 1980s. In its spectacularization of male power and strength (but not the ripped male torso), *Unbreakable* can be said to look backward to the 1990s, in which, as Jeffords points out, the preoccupation of 1980s cinema with hugely muscular, physically imposing action protagonists underwent "reevaluation." Key films from the Hollywood of the 1990s, as Jeffords suggests, took up the "rearticulation of masculine strength and power through internal, personal, and family-oriented models" (13). In other words, the hard-body narrative was thoroughly melodramatized, as in 1990's *Kindergarten Cop*, which features Arnold Schwarzenegger as a children's caretaker—but also as an action hero, albeit fully clothed. *Unbreakable* connects complexly with this cinematic trend and with one aspect of the therapeutic sensibility it so tellingly reflects: the rejection of postfeminized maleness. Discarding the model of the feminized man has become a prominent element of the men's movement during the past thirty years, as, for example, the recent and very influential work of Harvey C. Mansfield exemplifies.

Signs deals deeply and movingly with this conception of male crisis. The meaning of Hess's life becomes clear only when his family most needs him to assert himself decisively as their protector. But the film avoids engaging with the conflict between traditional concepts of masculinity and that different model Jeffords terms "the sensitive family man." From this perspective, *Unbreakable* can be read as reversing the movement of

consciousness traced in *Signs*. In Shyamalan's earlier film, the remasculinization of a 1980s "sensitive family man" reveals the metaphysical truths that now provide his life with meaning and purpose. A key connection to *Signs*, however, is that this thematic movement depends on the discovery that experience is "readable" because it's directed by Providence, which in its inscrutability sets the terms of apocalyptic moral struggle.

Because its thematic horizon is limited to the demonstration of a provident and rational order to things, *Signs* contributes to a more general ideological blind spot, "the apparent effacement of the masculine as a social construction in American culture," as Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark tellingly term it (2). Its inevitability never questioned, Hess's "proper" role as husband and father is simply assumed, his particular masculine style (which turns out to be all authoritativeness) is presented as a given. Even though it is concerned with male crisis, *Signs* thus does not address a key question about maleness as a social construction, which is, to cite Hark and Cohan again, "What are we to make of a masculinity that can preserve its hegemony only by confessing its anxieties at every turn?" (2-3). Or, to put it more plainly, why are men so unhappy if they are the ones in charge? *Unbreakable* answers this question by shifting focus to the hitherto hidden truth of the male body. No longer mistakenly seen as defined by an unfortunate affinity for purposeless violence, that body (its hardness as much moral as physical) finds its destined purpose: contesting the depredations of evildoers, especially of other men who would destroy the family. Instead of science fiction (*Signs*) or supernaturalism (*The Sixth Sense* [1999]), Shyamalan here engages another kind of fable, the superhero narrative, in order to dramatize the process of reading the body. Such reading, so the film's argument runs, depends on a traditional wisdom that, if in some ways unofficial, has nonetheless been handed down from one generation to the next through forms of popular storytelling.

In *Signs*, the sudden wisdom Graham Hess disposes of comes from within; his moment of enlightenment follows a flash of memory. In *The Sixth Sense*, extrasensory perception (a young boy "shining" to the presence of restless ghosts) provides the insight that enables the protagonist to understand and come to terms with who he is. *Unbreakable*, by way of contrast, adopts a culturalist perspective on the movement of consciousness, exploring the sources from which knowledge about what men should be and do might be obtained. Born with a genetic anomaly that subjects him to unending pain and disability, Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson) has spent much of his life reading comic books, an interest that, first encouraged by a mother eager to wean her depressed son from a constant diet of television, he has turned into a profession. Obviously successful and

well educated, Elijah runs a gallery that sells comic book art to an uptown clientele. But, much like Graham Hess, Elijah remains a bitter outsider despite his success. Once called "Mr. Glass" by his schoolmates because his fragile bones constantly break, Elijah remains tortured by the apparent meaninglessness of his affliction, which he is unwilling to accept as simply an unfortunate result of procreative roulette, with no transcendent meaning. Elijah's suffering does not mark out some identity for which he has been destined; it seems a sign (or so he would like to believe), even though it lacks any apparent referent.

But he has come to believe that in the comic narratives that fascinate him he has discovered a traditional knowledge to explain why his body is marked by a fragility that seems to mock the hardness that men should possess. For Elijah these texts are authoritative because of their cultural pedigree: "I have studied the form of comics intimately . . . I believe comics are our last link to an ancient way of passing on history." Comic book narratives thus have their source in real experiences; they offer their readers more than the insubstantial pleasures of wish-fulfilling fantasy. Even if, as Elijah admits, these experiences have been "chewed up in a commercial machine," that does not mean that something of their truth does not remain for our enlightenment and instruction. The central theme of comic book narrative is what most interests him: the struggle between a hero of superhuman strength and a villain who opposes the good with all his being because he has been marked deeply by misfortune. This latter is the role that he thinks destiny has selected him to play. Like Graham Hess, Elijah's experience compels him to raise metaphysical as well as existential questions; or, perhaps more accurately, in those two films the existential and the metaphysical turn out to be one and the same. The difference between the two characters is that Elijah is determined to seek out the meaning of what pains him. He has not embraced the denial and anomie that have transformed Hess into a bitter apostate. Instead, Elijah is desperate to read the meaning of his defective body: "If there is someone like me at one end of the spectrum, then couldn't there be someone else at the other end of the spectrum? The kind of person these stories are about. The kind of person put here to protect us."

What are we to make of Elijah's theory of an ancient wisdom about the self passed down through popular narrative? Interestingly, Elijah's stress on the reading of ancient, popular narrative suggests a close connection with the mythopoetic men's movement, which gained national prominence throughout the 1980s and 1990s by promoting a similar kind of psychological self-help based on Jungian cultural theory. "When we tell a story," Robert Bly, one of the leading lights of mythopoetic masculinism, avers

in his wildly popular *Iron John*, “we are not offering a new psychological theory: the story provides some sort of clear water that has descended over the centuries through yards and yards of earth” (x). For this reason ancient tales have much to tell us about ourselves. Not freighted with the rhetorical demand to represent the real, they can convey transhistorical truths with which we have somehow lost touch: “Many fairy stories are marvels. They carry hints of ancient religious life; they move swiftly among abandonments, betrayals, and shape-shiftings; and the brilliant resolutions that they present to such old griefs bypass almost every academic classification or judgment” (x).³

Promoting an archetypal reading of contemporary history, Bly suggests that we are now living under the rule of the Dark Father. The distinctive emotional note of our age is that “great sadness” whose symptoms are Know-Nothingism (“the lack of study” [x]) and that absence in art of new subject matter or original creative force noted by such theorists of postmodernism as Fredric Jameson, who laments that our artists, instead, find themselves donning “the masks of extinct mannerisms” (59). In *Iron John*, Bly retells and explicates a Grimm Brothers tale (*Eisernhans*) in order to provide “a way to understand the lethargy and this grief without actively blaming ourselves for it” (xi). Here, he suggests, is a form of retelling and reuse that escapes the postmodernist trap of depthless pastiche. The book’s message, in Bly’s humble characterization, is an antianswer—namely, that “we are still beginners in the labor of learning how to live. We really don’t know what we are doing” (xii). Nonetheless, resurrecting the ancient story of “Iron John,” he believes, is thus a deeply therapeutic act. *Unbreakable* concurs in Bly’s analysis of masculine crisis and dramatizes a similar movement of consciousness. As in his other films, Shyamalan here sets himself the task of understanding, and also pointing to some way beyond “lethargy and grief.”

This kind of cultural labor, Bly points out, does not lack for specific challenges: “Our obligation—and I include in ‘our’ all the men and women writing about gender—is to describe *masculine* in such a way that it does not exclude the masculine in women, and yet hits a resonant string in the man’s heart.” But this can only happen when “the qualities of the masculine are spoken of in the right way” (235). And what is that “right way”? Bly’s view of male crisis shares much in common with certain forms of postfeminist revisionism (such as the pointed rejection of misandry and antimasculinism by theorists such as Christina Hoff Sommers).⁴ Like Sommers, in fact, Bly celebrates liberation for both genders from stultifying roles, yet he also dismisses the wholesale abandonment of traditional male and female truths. For Bly the “great sadness” that men

feel is that during the 1970s men got more in touch with their feminine side but in the process did not “become more free.” These “soft males” are “not happy.” They find themselves hampered by “a lack of energy,” and so manage to be “life-preserving but not exactly life-giving.” They often seek to be coupled with “strong women who positively radiate energy” and in this way diminish their own psychological and physical resources (2–3).

Married to liberated females, soft men unfortunately have usually discovered that their “receptivity wasn’t enough to carry their marriages through troubled times.” The reason is that “in every relationship something *fierce* is needed once in a while” (4). The young male hero of *Eisernhans* discovers that something fierce through his reformatory encounter with the Wild Man, who is in turn released from enchantment to become the worthy knight Iron John. Out of gratitude for being returned to his true self, Iron John determines to dispose upon the boy a storehouse of treasure rich beyond belief. As in most of the Grimm Brothers *märchen*, the return to stable identity (both characters in complex ways become “themselves”) restores conventional values and relationships.

NO SECRET SHARER, SHE

That same movement toward restoration plays out in *Unbreakable*, as Price discovers, and then nurtures the growth toward self-awareness of David Dunn (Bruce Willis) who, because he survives with no injuries a train crash that kills more than a hundred others, might well be, so Price suspects, the kind of man of extraordinary strength and invulnerability celebrated in superhero narratives. David confesses to Elijah that he has been suffering from the “great sadness” that Bly suggests is the existential lot of men who have gotten in touch with their feminine side, to the exclusion, or in David’s case, the outright denial of their masculinity. This sadness is shared deeply by his adolescent son Joseph (Spencer Treat Clark), who looks for his father to claim the powerful masculinity, so Joseph believes, resides within him. Hearing the story of his miraculous survival, Elijah contacts him with a question about his body (“Have you ever been sick?”), and David begins to interrogate his own experience, overcoming the amnesia about his extraordinariness, and finding himself freed for the first time from that sadness. A college football player of extraordinary talent and strength, David fell in love with a woman, Audrey (Robin Wright Penn), who, like many feminists in the 1980s, found distasteful a sport that involves the display and exercise of “reprehensible” masculine qualities, especially competitiveness and a love of brutality. When the couple is involved in a car crash that injures Audrey, David, who walks away without a scratch after rescuing her from further

harm, takes this opportunity to fake an injury that gives him an excuse to end his football career. Audrey then agrees to marry him.

But the marriage, as the film opens, is floundering, with Audrey and David occupying separate bedrooms and contemplating divorce. Both Audrey and Joseph, it turns out, are waiting for David to assume his role as head of the family and end this impasse with a strong statement of his authority, desire, and commitment. David's evident timidity with Audrey makes clear how much he continues to suppress his masculinity; he responds only hesitatingly and uncertainly to her initial overture to reestablish their relationship. Their going out on a date (Audrey's suggestion) goes nowhere; intimacy of this kind proves incapable of restoring their emotional bond. In fact, David's movement back to authenticity plays out without the participation or, in the end, even the knowledge of Audrey. As David discovers his true, hitherto occulted identity, Audrey does not become his secret sharer. Quite the contrary. From her, his true maleness must be kept secret. His renewed masculinity, complexly enough, while necessary to restore them as man and wife, also threatens, or such is David's view at least, their chance for continuing marital harmony.

Instead, it is Price who teaches him about his powers of extrasensory perception, directed toward identifying evildoers. And it is Joseph who encourages him to explore his strength, whose limit they cannot together establish. David remembers that he has never been sick, but he does recall that as a child he once almost drowned. This discovery would seem to discredit Elijah's view that David has super powers. But his friend quickly convinces David of the opposite. Like all superheroes, he has a weakness that will be his biggest challenge to overcome.

Only through clarifying struggle, then, will David be able to contact his true self. Elijah suggests that he go among people where his extrasensory perception will reveal a mission. Wandering through a crowded train station (and "shining" to a number of minor league malefactors), David quickly discovers an opponent whose violation of the social order is worthy of his intervention: a janitor, who, after invading a suburban home, has murdered the father and taken the mother and two adolescent daughters hostage. These helpless unfortunates he has kept alive to torture and abuse. David arrives too late to save the mother, but releases the two girls. Grappling with the burly janitor, he is at first easily tossed out of the bedroom into the swimming pool below, whose cover threatens to trap and drown him. But the girls help him climb out after he refuses to panic. Having faced and overcome his worst fear, David reenters the house and this time manages to crush the life out of its illicit paterfamilias, who appropriately expires in the bedroom whose sanctity he has violated.

The meaning of this triumph, however, is more private than public. David has asserted his true nature in a world whose stark moral contrasts he is now fully able to grasp and act upon. He moves quickly to assume his role as a traditional husband. His surreptitious entrance into the house occupied by the brutal interloper rhymes with his late-night return home, where he scoops a sleeping Audrey up wordlessly in his arms and brings her back to his bed. She offers no protest, as it seems that this is the “something fierce” for which she too has been waiting. Audrey could not imagine herself married to someone devoted to violent competition in the service of something as inconsequential as a sport. By discovering and embracing the morally justifiable role toward which he seems to have been called, however, David implicitly endorses his wife’s disdain for the recreational brutality that attracted him as a young man, and which she persuaded (not forced) him to forgo. Instead, he finds himself through a struggle to preserve a family from a brutish male who would destroy it, surely a goal for the exercise of male power that Audrey would find it difficult to reject, even though she seems to be what Christian Hoff Sommers calls a “gender feminist” (16) who tends to regard male traits as inherently negative, perhaps even evil.

Now recognized for what it is, David’s hard body immediately becomes thoroughly melodramatized, as he discovers his proper sphere of action in the bourgeois family home. He is the one who, as Elijah has foreseen, has been put “here to protect us.” And David fulfills that mission by destroying a sociopathic usurper from the lower orders bent on rape who, in a seeming mockery of normalcy, goes out to his job in the morning only to return to his depredations in the evening. Ironically, Audrey finds herself marginalized as the narrative draws to a close. She is never afforded the opportunity to revise her reflexive antimasculinism in the light of the transformation that has caught up her husband. What is allowed to stand is her initial refusal to accept the kind of masculinity to which she was in some sense attracted to in David, but, perhaps influenced by feminist currents, ultimately rejected. The film’s ending thus has little to do with the reconciliation between husband and wife, which is, apparently, as complete as it is sudden (briefly dramatized in a morning-after breakfast scene). But Audrey is here a barely glimpsed and essentially mute presence.

Instead, the dramatic center of the scene is the poignant, wordless encounter between David and his son Joseph as they sit at the table. The paper contains an account of that mysterious stranger who rescued the two girls and killed the intruder. David pushes the front page toward Joseph, who reads with growing amazement. To the question that forms on his son’s face, David nods yes, while enjoining him to silence. David’s

embrace of this new identity is a secret to be shared with Joseph, whose desperate anxiety about his father's true nature is thereby relieved. But this arch-maleness, perhaps because it confirms Joseph's adolescent wish for a father stronger and less vulnerable than other men, must be concealed from Audrey, who cannot, so they silently agree, be given the opportunity to pass judgment upon it. And so it is deeply ironic that the renewed relationship between husband and wife will be founded on a fundamental deception in which their son must be made complicit. Their moment of intensely shared sentiment is thoroughly and exclusively masculinist. The implication is clear. David can only be the man he is destined to be (and that Joseph needs him to be) if the truth is kept from Audrey, who benefits from, but is barred from participating in, this life-changing moment.

A similar dynamic plays out in the film's final sequence, but with even greater irony. The scene is Elijah's studio where an exhibition of the comic book art he finds so fascinating and significant is opening to great public acclaim. From a little boy growing up in the projects and terrified of living because of the terrible pain every bump and knock made him suffer, Elijah has become well-educated, cultured, and confident—a successful art dealer respected in the wider community. His mother, who helps host the event, has every right to be proud of what she believes is an extraordinary narrative of self-fashioning, to which she contributed substantially by inculcating an interest in the comic books that have become her son's driving interest. But Elijah is just as much a stranger to his mother as David is a stranger to Audrey.

Neither woman has any inkling of the struggles each has endured in order to achieve an understanding of their maleness, nor will they ever come to know the true moral nature of the men they love. As in the wordless encounter between Joseph and his father, it is instead David and Elijah who have their privileged moment of secret sharing. David has come to the opening to tell his friend the good news that he has now embraced his identity as a protector of the weak; he is grateful to Elijah for the guidance he offered him. At this moment, the plot moves in that surprising direction for which Shyamalan has become justly famous. Elijah now makes David privy to the secret the two will subsequently share. It seems that the superhero fables whose meaning Elijah has pondered since childhood have led him not only to success in the ordinary sense but also toward a journey of self-discovery whose moral horror David directly "shines" to when he grabs his friend's extended hand. The train derailment that made clear David's invulnerability was no accident, no more than two other recent local tragedies—a hotel fire and a plane crash—that cost many lives. These were deliberate acts of sabotage committed by Elijah in his

attempt to find that man of extraordinary powers whose existence would explain his own extraordinary weakness. Acting the sociopath indifferent to the suffering of others has confirmed him in that very role, while providing David with his existential *doppelgänger*.

As originally conceived, *Unbreakable* was to have ended with David's recoiling in horror from Elijah, who reminds him that the hero and villain are often friends, joined as they are by a single destiny. Prerelease marketing of the film, however, convinced Shyamalan that some gesture toward the restoration of moral order be made, and so he added a postscript saying that Elijah was subsequently confined to an asylum for the criminally insane. This change, however, does little to alter the film's stark metaphysics, however much it might satisfy filmgoers' eagerness to see justice done. As in *Signs*, Providence is revealed in the moral ordering of creation: the seeming truth that David Dunn has been endowed with invulnerability and strength in order to protect others from evil. The fullness of that destiny, however, depends on the spiritual and physical emptiness of the fate Elijah must endure. That deprivation seems monumentally unjust. Elijah can know no deliverance from the role he has been fated to play in the cultural narratives he finds so fascinating.

In his dissatisfied recognition of his own incompleteness and powerlessness, Elijah hearkens back to the unbalanced, spiritually troubled protagonists of 1970s cinema. He too, much like Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), is "God's lonely man." But in the more optimistic form of melodrama conceived by M. Night Shyamalan to celebrate the masculinist urge toward wholeness and integration, Elijah interestingly serves as a poignant reminder of the cinematic road not taken. In fact, David's horrified withdrawal from his erstwhile friend at film's end perhaps provides a fitting image of the filmmaker's refusal to put at the center of his films the alienated outsiders of the "cinema of loneliness."

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NOTES

1. Stephen Humphries, for example, observes: "A handful of twisting, supernatural-themed imitators—'Gothika,' 'What Lies Beneath,' 'The Others'—were released by other studios. But it is Shyamalan, many observers say, who owns the genre today."
2. In *Masked Men: Masculinity and Movies in the Fifties*, Steven Cohan, speaking in 1997 of the postwar melding of social responsibility and sexual potency as male ideas, argues that "the unease with which this reformulation of masculinity took place, the disturbances it produced, and the instabilities it made evident, motivated the perception of a gender crisis that assumed national proportions and accounts for its continued significance four decades later" (xv). That crisis, at least as a subject matter for treatment in popular culture, shows no signs of abating in the first decade of the twenty-first century. While Shyamalan's last two releases, *Lady in the Water* (2006) and *The Happening* (2008) largely embrace different themes, both also feature males in crisis.
3. Compare the comments of philosophers Matt and Tom Morris about superhero narrative: "The best superhero comics, in addition to being tremendously entertaining, introduce and treat in vivid ways some of the most interesting and important questions facing all human beings—questions ethics, person and social responsibility, justice, crime and punishment, the mind and human emotions, personal identity, the soul, the notion of destiny, the meaning of our lives . . . and many other important issues" (x–xi).
4. Of particular interest here is her *Who Stole Feminism* and the arguments it raises against "gender feminists" (16).

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SPELLBOUND IN DARKNESS

SHYAMALAN'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL TWITCH

DAVID STERRITT

MANY A CRITIC HAS OBSERVED THAT THE FILMS OF M. Night Shyamalan don't always make narrative sense, even by the generous standards of the horror and fantasy genres. I noted one amusing example in my review of *Signs*, his space-monster fantasy of 2002: how did the invading aliens manage to arrive on Earth, set up an invisible shield in the sky, and massacre an untold number of humans around the globe, when they're so physically weak and mentally mushy that a mild-mannered veterinarian (played by the filmmaker) can imprison one in his kitchen cupboard? Another conundrum in the same movie was widely noted in reviews: if water is kryptonite to the aliens, for what conceivable reason would they invade a planet where H₂O is almost everywhere?

With imponderables like these littering Shyamalan's storylines, it's clear that considerations other than narrative coherence must be responsible for the (enormous) popularity and (less enormous) critical commendation that some of his movies have accrued; and the extranarrative elements that fans and reviewers talk about—moodiness, mysteriousness, “creepiness”—don't seem substantial enough to carry all the weight. Like many commentators, I think one of Shyamalan's secret cinematic weapons is his comparatively forthright concern with so-called spiritual matters, pertaining to both the “human spirit” and the metaphysical kind; he has indisputable talent for tapping into these areas in ways that resonate with contemporary audiences, thanks in part to the sociocultural dynamics that have driven the magical mystery tours of the so-called New Age movement since its advent in the 1970s. I hasten to add that Shyamalan doesn't so much systematically

develop his psycho-spiritual themes as intuitively explore and inquisitively nose around them. Yet the popularity of his most successful films testifies to the allure (although not, of course, to the artistic merit) of the formulas he has deployed in the years since the Disney studio decided to give him full creative control over *The Sixth Sense* (1999), his third film (and first successful one) as writer and director.

It remains to be seen whether Shyamalan can hold his own with the likes of Steven Spielberg and Peter Jackson over the long haul, and as I write this in 2009, there are signs that he's running out of steam; after the badly received *Lady in the Water* (2006), which grossed about \$42 million domestically, he tried to recoup with *The Happening* (2008), which earned only about \$60 million in American theaters despite Shyamalan's effort to juice things up with a topical subject (environmental menace) and enough violence to merit his first R rating. This notwithstanding, his Disney hits continue to have a loyal following, and the staying power of their harrowing, sometimes hallucinatory visions is a sign of the skill and savvy that brought them into being. Skill and savvy do not equate with depth and intellect, to be sure; nothing I've run across in Shyamalan's interviews, quoted remarks, or DVD extras suggests a proclivity for profound thinking. What does intrigue me is his distinctiveness as a cinematic stylist and, more specifically, his facility for using particular kinds of imagery, some of them daringly anomalous, in ways that enlarge and enhance the effectiveness of narratives that would otherwise seem even more problematic than they do. For a writer/director/producer who speaks with pride about his business acuity and takes conspicuous delight in the money and attention his films have generated, Shyamalan makes movies of surprising strangeness, not only in the curious stories they have to tell but also (and more so) in the decidedly offbeat visual language he has developed for putting these stories across. Analyzing the visual style of *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable* (2000), and *Signs*, film scholar Donato Totaro describes Shyamalan's style as "being within the bounds of classicism, but marked by a freedom to reinvent or invigorate traditional rules" ("Part 1"). Transposing this remark into musical terms, I'd suggest that Shyamalan has the sensibility of a romantic composer, not ignoring or rejecting the lessons of his classical forebears, but bending and enlarging them in pursuit of more modernist ends. This approach is well suited to the subjects—psychological and parapsychological, spiritual and pseudospiritual—that are his abiding concerns.

Central to both the stories and the images of Shyamalan's films is a powerful investment in *ambiguity* as a narrative strategy, a visual technique, and an aesthetic approximation of what appears to be his philosophy of

life. By their nature, however, the qualities of ambiguity are . . . ambiguous. As an open-minded outlook based on resistance to the simplistic lures of either/or logic, ambiguity can be a powerful creative tool; as an irresolute reaction to the ever-present fears, uncertainties, and futilities of the human condition, it can be a refuge from decision and a pretext for sloppy, constricted, and childish magical thinking. Shyamalan's films partake of ambiguity in both negative and positive ways. His susceptibility to slipshod storytelling and magical thinking produces the unpersuasive plots, concepts, and characters that often mar his movies. Yet in his most stimulating and provocative moments he embraces the constructive brand of ambiguity, using cinema's capacities for suggestion, indirection, and insinuation to open up fresh avenues of thought, especially with regard to *liminal* phenomena that are themselves ambiguous and impossible to classify in ordinary ways. This is what raises Shyamalan's best works beyond the routine scariness and thrill-mongering of conventional horror and suspense pictures, allowing them to burrow under the skin as few of their contemporaries do.

Although they invariably deal with supernatural (or seemingly supernatural) matters, Shyamalan's films also derive considerable power from their engagement with homelier issues rooted in the everyday reality of familiar emotions. The most obvious of these are fear and confusion, which are inevitable in tales about menacing and disorienting events; but equally pervasive, and arguably more potent in its effect on audiences, is the sense of intense loneliness that wraps character after character in shrouds of physical, mental, and moral solitude. Some of them are cut off from normality by outside forces—think of Dr. Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) doing his slow dance of death-in-life in *The Sixth Sense* or Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson) born into a lifetime of debility in *Unbreakable*—while others dwell off the beaten path by choice but meet with similarly distressing consequences: the secluded farm family in *Signs*, the reclusive community in *The Village* (2004), perhaps the denizens of the self-contained apartment complex in *Lady in the Water*, and definitely the tiny bands of wandering refugees in *The Happening*. Film critic Richard Corliss gets this right when he calls Shyamalan's films “scary movies that are really art films, adult films,” with heroes who “carry despair like a tumor.”

These protagonists are “figuratively or literally, the walking dead,” Corliss continues, and the mark of their aloneness is being “cut off from their wives and children by some awful event.” He adds that heroism is “the cure for [their] emotional entropy” (Corliss), but while I agree with Corliss's diagnosis of the disease, I don't think heroism is much of a cure for Shyamalan's characters. The resolutions of their stories rarely feel like

major-key triumphs in the usual Hollywood vein, and their moments of victory along the way often stem less from conventional heroics than from synchronicity or supernatural intervention. The unpredictable timing and all-around unlikelihood of Shyamalan's climaxes are calculated to throw us off balance in the same ways the characters are thrown off balance; this is hardly novel in horror stories, but what *does* seem novel is how drastically and chronically the characters are discombobulated by the tribulations Shyamalan inflicts on them. To watch a horror movie, critic Morris Dickstein once observed, is "to court a certain danger, to risk being disturbed, shaken up, assaulted," and if we succumb too completely, "we imagine we might come unhinged, or blow up, or be 'scared to death'" (51). More than most movie characters, the people in a Shyamalan horror film look like people who've just *seen* a Shyamalan horror film—they're drained and drawn, uncertain of everything they see, hear, or sense. Real-life moviegoers rarely suffer symptoms so severe, but the angst of Shyamalan's characters has a way of seeping off the screen and infiltrating, however faintly and imperfectly, the sensibilities of the people watching them. I don't want to overstate the efficacy of Shyamalan's style, which is often weakened by the holes in his narratives, the glibness of his emotions, and the naïveté of his ideas. Yet the sense of brooding menace he achieves with relatively little fuss and bother substantiates his status as a purposeful artist with a serious, if sometimes muddled, aesthetic agenda and a knack for making moviegoers, along with his characters, feel spellbound in darkness.

THE CORNER OF THE EYE

Looking more closely at the tensions between narrative and style in Shyamalan's films, the soggy resolution of *Signs*—a good dousing at home, plus some "primitive" holiness in the Middle East, knocks the space monsters off their pins—is a suitable place to start. Even a critic as sympathetic to Shyamalan's work as Lesley Brill finds this gimmickry "a bit illogical," but adding the earlier *Unbreakable* and the later *Lady in the Water* into the discussion, he points out that water and its metaphorical meanings (purification, absolution, redemption) are important in all three films, conveying thematic implications in coded, perhaps subliminal ways. Brill then makes a virtue of Shyamalan's penchant for far-fetched twists, arguing that the credulity-stretching plot of *The Village* may be implausible on purpose, consciously intended to seem as outlandish as the "silly lies" fabricated by some of the film's characters to shore up the security of their enterprise. Taken this way, the film acquires a dialogic dimension that's the opposite of the Village's self-imposed isolation from its surroundings,

and the story's improbability becomes an implicit admonition to moviegoers against accepting the claims of either authority or art without a healthy degree of skepticism.

I want to go farther and suggest that the primary contact point between *The Village* and the Village is not so much a healthy skepticism as a bone-deep paranoia toward authority and art. This unremitting dread, manifested in every Shyamalan film since *The Sixth Sense*, is rooted in a gnawing anxiety about the power of visual imagery, especially in cinema, to conjure up realistic semblances of the fantastic, the uncanny, the psychologically noxious, and the spiritually toxic. An important reason for the appeal of Shyamalan's films is the ingenuity with which he uses cinematic resources to evoke, grapple with, and in the end comfortingly contain the perilous forces that so insistently compel his attention. But there's a paradox here, since cinematic resources are anchored in the self-same visual domain that spawns the phenomenally vivid (if ontologically spurious) forces and phantasms that give Shyamalan so much anxiety in the first place. What emanates from this dilemma is a volatile attraction-repulsion relationship with the realm of images that helps produce the off-kilter atmospherics for which his films are famous, and motivates two of his distinctive stylistic devices: a habit of engaging with his imaginary phantasms by means of glancing, oblique, corner-of-the-eye shots, as if the creatures he's conjured up were too alarming for an unaverted gaze; and a corresponding penchant for stable, symmetrical shots when facing nonphantasmal subjects, which he often photographs in fluid, drawn-out takes imbued with an almost trancelike quality, as if staring down diegetic "reality" might postpone the dreaded task of confronting fears and phantoms that lurk beneath. This fleeting-shot/trancelike-shot pattern would be a mere tic if Shyamalan applied it heedlessly or mechanically, but he's clever enough to save it for appropriate moments and even to work it against the grain; as I'll show later, some very effective moments use lengthy, stable shots to invest nonphantasmal objects (most notably reflective surfaces and television sets) with unsettling visual overtones. Together these devices contribute to nuanced evocations of the multifaceted relationships between the actual, experiential world and the fictive, illusory world that shadows it.

The motivations behind Shyamalan's methodologies appear to be rooted in a set of aesthetic and spiritual issues that perplex and perhaps haunt him, organized around the notion that daily existence is fraught with horrendous threats that are difficult or impossible to eliminate but can be diverted and even dissipated if one sublimates them into fantasy with enough consistency and conviction. Using the terms of Jacques

Lacan's psychoanalytic paradigm, I suggest that the power of Shyamalan's work derives in large part from the intensity with which it reflects a loss of faith in the everyday symbolic order, or the "big Other," as theorist Slavoj Žižek calls it—the impersonal network of social and cultural interactions that allows the possibility (or at least the illusion) of human concord and communication. As already noted, many of Shyamalan characters are at once trapped in loneliness and forced into contact with monstrous intruders. "If the functioning of the big Other is suspended," Žižek writes, "the friendly neighbor coincides with the monstrous Thing," pitching relationships into conflict and paranoia; and conversely, "if there is no neighbor to whom I can relate as a human partner, the symbolic Order itself turns into the monstrous Thing that is directly parasitical upon me" (670). Paradoxically, however, we need the existence of that monstrous Thing, because it alone provides the essential substrate for shared human experience. "If there is no Thing to underpin our everyday symbolically regulated exchange with others," Žižek declares, "we find ourselves in a . . . flat, aseptic universe in which subjects are . . . reduced to lifeless pawns in the regulated game of communication" (670). Perhaps the purest embodiment of these ideas in Shyamalan's work is *The Village*, inhabited by people who found the symbolic order of their erstwhile urban neighbors so odious that they established a counterfeit one of their own, a flat and aseptic community guarded by counterfeit Things that reduce the younger residents to a steady state of paranoia. The psychiatrist Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) finds himself in a similarly (and literally) lifeless world after the encounter with his psychotic adversary at the beginning of *The Sixth Sense*, but a way out opens up for him when he finally comprehends the new reality he has entered. Something comparable applies to disenchanted cleric Graham Hess (Mel Gibson) in *Signs*; plunged into flat, aseptic faithlessness after his wife (Patricia Kalember) is accidentally killed by a neighbor (played by Shyamalan himself), he's able to regain a sense of communication—or communion—with her when confrontation with the space-alien Thing wrenches his mind out of its melancholic rut. And so on, in some (if not all) of Shyamalan's other films. My goal isn't to push one-to-one correspondences between these movies and Lacanian ideas, but simply to suggest that Shyamalan's idiosyncratic themes and techniques may resonate with audiences because they are connected with transpersonal issues that are as ineluctable and compelling as the symbolic network itself.

At its heart, then, Shyamalan's vision is warily fixed on the unreliable Symbolic and the monstrous Thing, and the chronic fears these generate feed two complementary reactions: on one hand, the urge to construct

more and more motion-picture nightmares in the quest for psychic mastery known as repetition compulsion; and on the other, the self-protective impulse to shield the physical eyes (hence the averted gaze) and the mind's eye (hence the stories' patent artificiality) from the obscenities coiled within those nightmares. I use "obscenities" in a broad sense, referring to the generalized strangeness of Shyamalan's most unsettling images—the disfigured ghosts in *The Sixth Sense*, the grotesque aliens in *Signs*, the monstrous forest dwellers in *The Village* before their speciousness is unveiled. But obscenities in the sexual sense must also abound in Shyamalan's cinematic unconscious, which may explain why his films steer so compulsively clear of *unsymbolic* sexuality. In cinema as in life, the things we're most eager to disavow are the things most likely to sneak up on us from behind and harass us forever after. It's an ironic fact that the residents of *The Village* cope with Those We Do Not Speak Of by speaking of them incessantly; suppler in his thinking, Shyamalan copes with That We Do Not Look At by gazing *and* not-gazing, seeing *and* unseeing, observing *and* eradicating in the (literal) blink of an eye. This epistemological twitch is the foundation for Shyamalan's remarkable corner-of-the-eye images, and occasionally it also prompts interesting dialogue from his wiser characters. One such is Ivy Walker (Bryce Dallas Howard), the blind girl in *The Village*, who makes some memorable remarks to Lucius Hunt (Joaquin Phoenix), the young man who might soon become her romantic partner:

Lucius: Are you upset you can't see?

Ivy: I see the world, Lucius Hunt, [but] not as you see it.

Ivy to Lucius: When I was younger . . . you used to hold my arm when we walked. Then suddenly you stopped. One day, I even tripped in your presence and nearly fell. I was faking, of course, but still you did not hold me. Sometimes we don't do things we want to do so that others won't know we want to do them.

And sometimes we don't confront things we want to confront so that others won't know we want to confront them. And so that we won't know, or have to admit to, ourselves.

INTO THE LIMINAL

Closely tied to Shyamalan's epistemological twitch is his characteristic recourse to indirect expression of the sinister forces that confront his characters. Here is a brief list of some prominent symbolic constructions in his films and latent meanings embedded in them:

- *The Sixth Sense*: Restive, elusive ghosts = the uneasy, unknowing dead
- *Unbreakable*: Elijah's physical fragility and psychopathic crimes = the unruly, ungovernable body
- *Signs*: Murderous, coldblooded aliens = the indifferent or malignant cosmos
- *The Village*: Terrifying apparitions of the forest = the human capacities for delusion, fanaticism, and deception of self and others
- *Lady in the Water*: Mythical phantasms in homely surroundings = the irruption of infantile naivety in the precarious adult world
- *The Happening*: A deadly and inscrutable toxin = guilt, anxiety, and foreboding at humanity's relentless suffocation of its environment

Since he owes allegiance to the commercial-film convention of the happy ending, sometimes modified into the bittersweet or ironic ending, Shyamalan takes it as his business to neutralize the evils and redress the injuries that afflict his protagonists. His mechanisms for accomplishing these tasks have a similar basis in all of his major films: the emphatic reinstatement of differences "between within and without, male and female, with and against," in anthropologist Mary Douglas's words (5), so that a sense of cognitive and emotional order can be restored and sustained, to the relief of characters and moviegoers alike.

Shyamalan's persistent pattern of disturbing the commonsense order of things and then working to reestablish a "natural" and "proper" equilibrium bears out his fascination with liminal phenomena, as mentioned earlier; his method is to invite or provoke a confusion of categories, then undo the chaos he has caused—or rather, disavow it—by manipulations of narrative and style. All of his major characters are in liminal, in-between states that must be sorted out in order for the narrative to reach a satisfactory conclusion. Most of the films take place in slightly surrealistic versions of the ordinary world, wherein the liminal characters must find their proper places, always assisted by an influx of knowledge that the characters have hitherto denied for personal and emotional reasons. Malcolm of *The Sixth Sense* realizes with help from Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment) that he must relinquish his mournful quasi-life and take his proper place among the dead; David Dunn (Bruce Willis) of *Unbreakable* learns from Elijah and his own son, Joseph (Spenser Treat Clark), that he must accept the reality of his superpowers and the responsibilities they entail; Graham (Mel Gibson) of *Signs*, aided by an existential crisis and a recovered memory, rediscovers his special relationship with the divine. *Signs* is itself a liminal film, exploring the dynamics of in-between

existence through the plights of individual characters, like the earlier movies, but now locating the entire narrative in an in-between space, namely the family's out-of-the-way farm. *The Village* also takes place in such a zone, poised between (simulated) tradition and (concrete) modernity—much as the protagonists of the earlier films are poised between the natural and the supernatural—until Ivy Walker finds a tentative way out, again facilitated by the willingness to embrace a new kind of knowledge. *Lady in the Water* interestingly varies this pattern, portraying a bounded community with occupants who *collectively* accrue the unfamiliar knowledge they need to terminate a destructive situation. *The Happening* begins in the crowded precincts of New York City, but then sets in motion a narrative that systematically narrows the population base to fewer and fewer on-screen characters, all roaming through the perilous expanse that a vast sector of the United States has become—once a thriving region, now a death-infested liminal zone between nature's spontaneous vitality and humanity's lethal self-destructiveness.

Shyamalan's continual return to liminal spaces and communities points out the importance of the *abject* in his films, which are forever conjuring abjection up and wishing it away. Culture theorist Julia Kristeva locates the abject in that which “disturbs identity, system, order [and] does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Which is to say, the liminal. This can take a multitude of forms, but the centrality of children and teenagers in Shyamalan's cinema directs attention to childhood and adolescence as liminal zones between the dependence of infancy and the independence of maturity. Studying rites of passage to adulthood in various cultures, anthropologist Victor Turner finds that the candidate for initiation is often regarded as a “liminal *persona*” by the community, which frequently uses “complex and bizarre” symbolism “modeled on human biological processes” to compensate for the “structural ‘invisibility’ of” the liminal figures themselves (96). Not surprisingly, issues of differentiation and categorization are at the heart of such symbolism. If the liminal persona is seen as an unformed figure awaiting its place in the structured adult community, its traits are considered to be “not yet classified” and their symbolization is often “modeled on processes of gestation and parturition.” Conversely, if the liminal figure's departure from childhood is emphasized, its traits are conceptualized as “no longer classified” and represented by symbols “drawn from the biology of death, decomposition, catabolism, and other physical processes that have a negative tinge” (96). Shyamalan's films are often organized around rites of passage undergone by both children and adults. The children include Joshua Beal (Joseph Cross) of *Wide Awake*,

who passes from doubt and suspicion to faith in God and the possibilities of love; Cole of *The Sixth Sense*, who fulfills a murder victim's wish and thus assumes his role of emissary for the dead; Joseph of *Unbreakable*, whose growing realization of David's superhuman power enables David to discover this for himself; and Ivy of *The Village*, who finds the courage to leave her community for the unknown world beyond it. The adults include Malcolm of *The Sixth Sense* and David of *Unbreakable* as well as Graham of *Signs* and Cleveland Heep (Paul Giamatti) of *Lady in the Water*, who learns to confront and overcome the brooding grief that has cut him off from a fulfilling life.¹ It's noteworthy that in Shyamalan's earlier films the passage to a new status or condition is in some way a joint venture between child and adult, beginning with *Wide Awake*, in which Joshua learns to accept the faith that allowed Grandpa Beal (Robert Loggia) to pass peacefully into death; later this formula usually centers on a single main character or, in *Lady in the Water* and arguably in *The Village*, on one primary character plus the community in which the character resides. In keeping with Turner's analysis of liminal symbolism, moreover, Shyamalan often uses biological metaphors in association with this theme. Bodily dissolution is seen infrequently but felt continually in *The Sixth Sense*, where Malcolm is shot and the little girl is poisoned; Elijah's illness in *Unbreakable* is deep down in his bones, and David affirms his specialness by pushing his muscles beyond human limits; Graham's son (Rory Culkin) survives in *Signs* because his asthmatic lungs shut down; Ivy's spiritual vision in *The Village* is enhanced by her physical blindness; and so on. For all its atmospheric creepiness, Shyamalan's cinema never leaves the body far behind.

Shyamalan's fascination with transitional sites and situations calls to mind Sigmund Freud's idea that fantasy itself is a liminal phenomenon, simultaneously articulating desire and defending against its threatening aspects—a dual operation necessitated by the fact that “what is *prohibited* . . . is always present in the actual formation of the wish,” as theorists J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis put it (318). Drawing on Pontalis's contention that “the dream screen should not only be understood as a surface for projection, it is also a surface for protection—it forms a screen,” film scholar Dennis Giles describes the experience of cinema as “simultaneously a screening and a screening-off” (37) staging “defenses *against* desire” (39) along with desires and wishes themselves. Giles made his observations before Shyamalan started making movies, but his notion of “anticipatory vision,” whereby “little or nothing” of the bad object is shown or seen, is a striking anticipation of Shyamalan's practices. “These are scenes . . . that toy with and frustrate the wish to see,” Giles writes;

“veiled scenes of partial, blocked or inadequate vision; delayed visions, even apparently empty visions in which one sees clearly, but there is nothing significant to see, no apparent purpose to the image.” This kind of vision “ambiguates the image,” conveying the immanence of “a monstrous presence which belongs to an *other* scene—a scene off-screen, and not fully conscious,” via shots and sequences whose manifest content is ostensibly benign (40).

Giles wants to understand how the desires of producers, exhibitors, and audiences collude to make “good movie experiences” out of subjects that would be terrifying or horrifying in real life. Putting a slightly different spin on his analysis, I want to suggest that particular elements of Shyamalan’s role in contemporary film—his personal control over his productions, at least in the major phase of his career, and his highly ambivalent rapport with standard ingredients of the horror-fantasy genre—have attracted him with uncommon force to techniques of anticipatory vision, which can also be called anticipatory blindness, since unseeing is involved at least as much as seeing is. The proximate cause of his stylistic flourishes and ambiguated images is his aforementioned urge to impose order and system on a vulnerable and uncertain world, staging momentous clashes between the order we invariably seek and the chaos we inevitably have; the proximate source of his popular success is his ability to lure audiences into his imaginary domains through unthreatening techniques of implication and insinuation. The images caught in fleeting, oblique glimpses gain jolting power from their paradoxical success at simultaneously revealing and concealing—think of the alien in *Signs* barely caught by the news camera or the first sight of a red-garbed apparition in *The Village* or David’s quick-as-thought clairvoyant flashes in *Unbreakable*, and so on—whereas the moments viewed in lengthy, trancelike shots mark out fluid, ephemeral sectors in which (fearsome) physical realities may be challenged and (benevolent) metaphysical potentialities evoked. In addition to conveying a quality of mesmeric stasis, even when the camera is quietly on the move, the trancelike shots often contain characters who have slid into seemingly hypnotic states—liminal zones of the overburdened psyche—as when the mourners at the wake of little Kyra Collins (Mischa Barton) in *The Sixth Sense* are transfixed with horror by the ghastly revelation that confronts them on the TV screen. Such moments are often enhanced by the keenly felt presence of off-screen space noted earlier, in which we sense the unclean, polluting things that the filmmaker finds it so difficult to face; one thinks of Kristeva’s observation that the abject “lies outside, beyond the set,” from whence it “does not cease challenging its master” (2).

Sound also plays an important part in Shyamalan's unsettling moods, and in an interesting reversal of horror-film convention, the noises and voices on his soundtracks often gain in effectiveness from the unusually *low* volume levels he frequently employs, creating a movie-theater equivalent of the reverent hush maintained in church. This deferential, sometimes awe-struck stillness comports well with Shyamalan's visual strategies of stasis and symmetry, and the reverential atmosphere he produces by combining these expedients makes an apposite background for the Christian references that recur so often in his films.² It is so apposite, in fact, that I think the effects he's after are akin to those of Christian iconography in late antiquity, which employs what art historian Hans Belting describes as "immaterial, akinetic" forms to evoke an invisible (immaterial) realm by visible (material) means (129).³ Like an icon maker, Shyamalan wants to turn our thoughts toward indiscernible, unearthly things, and also like an icon maker, he sees numinous qualities in the art he practices. Angela Dalle Vacche, discussing the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, has given the best account of links between cinema and icon painting, observing that for some filmmakers, "the filmic image is meant to make visible something invisible, to release from the inside out a shape that is made of emotional nuances, or otherworldly energy." In such cinema, "the filmic image is not a sign standing for something else but a site where something other or divine, lost or repressed, manifests itself directly, in first person, for our eyes" (138).

Shyamalan's films are foothills compared with Tarkovsky's lofty mountains, and Shyamalan has never conceptualized his filmmaking in terms remotely as insightful as are found in Tarkovsky's theoretical writings. Yet in his own instinctive way, Shyamalan has taken on some of the same concerns. In his most resonant scenes, as in the Russian Orthodox art that Tarkovsky drew on, "the divinity exists in human form through the presence of the icon itself, a special kind of image system, since the boundary between signifier and signified is so elastic that the beholder can relate to the representation as if it were the represented itself, to the image of God *as to God*" (Vacche 138). Shyamalan shares Tarkovsky's conviction that the cinematic signifier can be suffused with a life of its own, and not an ordinary life but a richly allusive, incipiently spiritual one that can engage the receptive spectator in authentically transcendent ways—an *iconic* life, that is, in the full semiotic and spiritual senses of the term. One way to illustrate this is to consider one of Shyamalan's stylistic signatures, his frequent use of mirrors and other reflective surfaces. A common iconographic strategy is to eliminate pictorial depth, so as to solicit the viewer's immediate and undistracted gaze, and then to turn that gaze back on itself, transferring attention from the exteriority of the sign to the

interiority of the beholder. This has an analogue in Shyamalan's reflecting images, which exaggerate the depthless quality of the already flat cinematic picture, rendering the pictured things less "real" while enhancing their intimation of a different "reality" that eludes representation.

Shyamalan's use of the reflection trope often serves less transcendental purposes, of course—lending visual variety, adding to a spooky mood, and so forth—and its presence isn't limited to literal mirror images. Totaro's analysis astutely takes "reflection" to include not only objects replicated in mirrors, windows, and other such surfaces but also the "paralleling shots and symmetrical compositions" that recur in Shyamalan's films ("Part 2"). An effective instance of the motif's figurative power comes at the beginning of *The Sixth Sense*, when the film cuts three times between a two-shot of Malcolm and Anna by the fire-side and their reflected image in the glass cover of Malcolm's honorary plaque; as Totaro interprets this, "the 'false' reflected image foreshadows the illusion which the narrative will soon play on the spectator" and also provides a metaphor "for the false reality of the Malcolm character, who will soon walk through the film as a 'reflection' of his living self" ("Part 2"). Other examples include the many reflection shots of Elijah in *Unbreakable*—each time we meet this breakable, duplicitous character at a different age, Totaro notes, it's in a reflected image—and some novel variations on the theme in *Signs*, as when the alien proves capable of mirroring its environment, and when Merrill and the alien appear to be reflected in a water glass until the glass is knocked over and we see that the camera was actually peering *through* the glass.

It's no accident that the most startling reflection shot in *Signs* is of the alien reflected in the family's television set, since with or without reflections, TV sets often play supporting roles in Shyamalan's films—serving generally as sites of reflected imagery and markers of domestic space, and specifically as repositories of memory (e.g., the wedding video in *The Sixth Sense*), guarantors of fact and connectors to the world at large (e.g., verifying the reality of the crisis in *The Happening*), and sites of revelation (e.g., the crucial disclosures in *Signs*). TV sets have a deeper, more mystical significance in Shyamalan's films than these examples suggest, moreover, closely linked to the real-yet-unreal nature of both film and televisual images—a quality that's squared when a TV picture is *seen* on film. Television is a sort of secular godhead in the world according to Shyamalan, endowed with an efficacy that's almost magical—able not only to convey knowledge from the transpersonal sphere (the big Other) but also to stand as domestic idols, electronic divinities that can always be trusted and are usually there when you need them.⁴

For a dramatic example, consider a scene I mentioned earlier: the viewing of the revelatory videocassette at Kyrá's wake in *The Sixth Sense*, which acquires an emphatic strangeness, far exceeding its narrative and thematic meanings, from precisely the quasi-sacred aura that Shyamalan bestows on TV sets. The setup of this scene is peculiar to begin with, starting from Cole's slow march toward Kyrá's father, Mr. Collins (Greg Wood), carrying and presenting the oddly boxed cassette with the solemnity of an acolyte bearing a holy offering. Kyrá's dad opens the box with equal gravity, whereupon the movie screen abruptly fills with a uniform field of TV static; and then the video commences. Before the TV screen reveals the filicidal act, it displays Kyrá's puppet show unfolding on a miniature stage whose proscenium is a frame-within-the-frame of the TV picture, which is itself a frame-within-the-frame of the TV cabinet, which is itself a frame-within-the-frame of Shyamalan's composition. (This sort of Chinese-box construction, arranged in rigorously symmetrical configurations connoting confinement and entrapment, appear at many important moments in Shyamalan's cinema.) The puppet show is disrupted when Mrs. Collins (Angelica Torn) enters the room to mix and administer Kyrá's daily dose of poison, and as the mourners at the wake look on, we gradually see that many of them have stopped their chatting and mingling to gather behind Mr. Collins in a group. The shots grow progressively tighter on the TV screen and Mr. Collins as the video reaches its climax, and a subsequent shot—an "irrational cut," in Gilles Deleuze's terminology—shows Mr. Collins now in a standing position, posed with several of the guests, all of them unable to wrench their eyes from the TV set; we know the video has ended, because we just saw static reappear, but the spectators are still transfixed by the epiphanic presence of the apparatus itself.⁵ An eerie metamorphosis has occurred—one moment these people were an ordinary social group, the next they stand as mute and immobile as corpses, arrested simulacra of human personalities. If the TV screen were simply a channel of information, they would presumably speak, react, cry out at what they've seen; the message would overwhelm the medium and compel them to take action. But so apocalyptic is the power of this grim epiphany that their bodies seem like empty containers whose souls have run for shelter. Posed by Shyamalan in a fearful symmetry that underscores their paralyzing shock, they are transfixed and consumed; and Shyamalan's camera seems equally mesmerized by the spectacle *they* present in their awed astonishment.

This is as affecting a moment as any in the film, and Shyamalan surely knows this, because he reprises it in later works—in *Signs*, for instance, when the symmetrically posed family members sit immobile before a

newscast on their TV set, the camera moving gradually toward the console until its image fills the entire movie screen, crowding out all other sights just as the newscast's dire information crowds out all other thoughts. The power of these television sets to enchant and captivate their beholders has superhuman, perhaps supernatural overtones; it is the primitive, unfathomable power of a god that elicits primitive, unfathomable hopes and fears—simultaneously saving and subduing us with its occult connections to imagery that ensnares and fascinates, knowledge that terrifies and heals, forces for transcendent good and prodigious evil that dwell in the inscrutable heart of modern media. Scenes centering on media are among the most original and disquieting in Shyamalan's cinema, which represents an ongoing effort to comprehend and mobilize the enigmatic energies they embody.

WHAT HIS PICTURES WANT

In his aptly titled book *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, art theorist W. J. T. Mitchell observes that what some pictures want is to turn their beholders into (metaphorical) stone, stopping us dead and holding us in thrall. Naming this “the Medusa effect” after the mythical figure whose hideous appearance would petrify those who gazed on it, he writes that the desire of such pictures is “to change places with the beholder, turning him or her into an image for the gaze of the picture,” thus actualizing what critic Michael Fried calls the “primordial convention” of painting (Mitchell 36). This is surely a primordial convention of cinema as well, born from the medium's uneasy mixture of artistic ambitions and commercial necessities, and few have worked more single-mindedly than Shyamalan to explore the power of film (and television, its close cousin) to freeze us in our tracks with literally captivating spectacles. He fails at least as often as he succeeds, and his declining fan club suggests that for now he's not succeeding much at all; but his continuing attempts make for an arresting show, compelling attention even when other aspects of his movies disappoint.

Do the audacious elements in Shyamalan's films outweigh the wrong-headed ones? I think they do. Cinema is largely a mimetic art, especially when it aims to attract mass audiences, and Shyamalan seems intriguingly aware that the mimetic drive is a psychobiological imperative with all-pervading influence, at least in Western culture—forever producing “the ghostly Self as mimetic extension of the selfish gene, through the human technology of finding one's being in the Other of society and divinity,” in cultural theorist Mark Pizzato's formulation. “We each inherit a haunted theatre of particular brain phantoms and neural zombies,” Pizzato

continues, “as we develop a mimetic sense of Self, fated to die, yet yearning for spectral survival” through memes that replicate ad infinitum in the external womb of family, culture, and society into which our fragile bodies and unformed minds are quasi-prematurely born (232). On this view, we are eternally rapt beholders, contemplating ancestral ghosts and gods through the “memories and imaginations of [our] culture’s stages and screens.” Is this a route to a “mystical ecstasy” that opens our minds and souls to the infinite, or is it merely a regressive passage “to the memory traces of a lost womb”? (236). Shyamalan’s films tell me the answer may be both—we are incorrigible seekers of transcendence *and* reactionary suckers for any reactionary fiction with conviction and pizzazz. Shyamalan’s ability to balance his creative personality on the precarious line between those contradictory tendencies is the most beneficial byproduct of the taste for ambivalence and gift for ambiguity he has assiduously cultivated. He knows a paradox when he sees one, and his mission is to bring it in alive so the rest of us can puzzle over it with him. To see the unseeable and unsee the seeable is a rare talent in commercial film, and Shyamalan has it. A sixth sense.

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NOTES

1. Although the main concern of *Lady in the Water* is ostensibly Story (Bryce Dallas Howard) and her predicament, Shyamalan said that for him the film is "all about saving [Heep]" (Bamberger 242, 244).
2. Obvious examples include the church scenes in *The Sixth Sense* and various aspects of *Signs*, including Graham's rediscovery of Christian faith.
3. Belting is discussing the *typos hieros*, or "sacred type," a style that favors stereotyped features over lifelike verisimilitude; since many philosophers of late antiquity "emphasized the transparency of material images (as vessels containing the supernatural substance) to reveal their archetype," artists felt encouraged to "make visible the icon's reference to a reality otherwise invisible" (129).
4. Something similar goes for radio devices; see *Signs* and *Lady in the Water*.
5. In the "time-image" cinema of irrational cuts, Deleuze argues, films can put thought "into contact with an unthought, the unsummonable, the inexplicable, the undecidable, the incommensurable" (214). Shyamalan's cinema is overdue for thorough Deleuzian analysis.

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CHAPTER 5

FOUR FILMS BY M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

OH, THE IRONY . . .

KATHERINE A. FOWKES

MUCH OF THE HYPE, PRAISE, AND THE (INCREASINGLY WIDESPREAD) criticism of M. Night Shyamalan's work stems from the writer/director's auteur status, and the expectations created by his first hit, *The Sixth Sense* (1999). Viewers and critics came to expect a horror movie with a twist or surprise ending, and most reviewers seem unable to avoid a reference to these expectations. Although Shyamalan is associated with suspense and horror, his first four major films share other significant thematic similarities not necessarily associated with horror films. While *Unbreakable* (2000), *Signs* (2002), and *The Village* (2004) all resemble *The Sixth Sense* in featuring horrific moments that raise questions of good and evil, the scary and evil components of the films are mitigated by narratives of catharsis and redemption. And while each movie does feature a kind of a twist, the mechanisms leading to the twists and subsequent revelations might be better understood as extensions of the overall teleology of the story worlds. That is, a kind of ironic justice is operating such that each film presents an initial tragic dilemma that actually holds the seeds of its own resolution—a kind of circular logic that reveals itself as inevitable destiny. Thus, the “revelations” that occur near the end of each film need not be considered only as “trick” endings. They should also be examined for their role in the thematic design of the films, each of which is characterized by epistemological uncertainty and the inherent ambiguity of signs. Although ambiguity plays a critical role in all four films, in each case it is eventually overturned in favor of ontological certainty. This certainty is

ratified, in part, by an emphasis on “seeing” so that while visual signs may be initially thrown into question, they ultimately aid in the restoration of coherent meaning, one linked to the importance of family, community, and ultimately storytelling.

To fear love is to fear life, and those who fear life are already three parts dead.

—Bertrand Russell

It is no secret that expectations for a spooky story were encouraged by advance publicity for *The Sixth Sense* that, among other things, featured a little boy’s now-famous proclamation: “I see dead people.” Yet the film itself also employs narrative and filmic techniques that draw on conventions of horror for the purpose of then subverting them in favor of a different type of story altogether. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, *The Sixth Sense* is not so much a horror film, as a type of melodrama *posing* as a horror film, a tactic that facilitates the trick ending for which the film is known (see my “Melodramatic Specters”). Or rather, the film exhibits a doubled theme and structure, a trait shared by all the films to be discussed here, all essentially melodramas doubling as horror or suspense stories. By melodrama, I mean a type of drama that focuses on personal tragedies and heightened emotions that play out in romantic or family settings. Melodramas are also known for seeming “excessive” or contrived, the latter being a complaint about some of Shyamalan’s films.¹ But if, as Franco Moretti describes it, a common component of many melodramas is an emphasis on “the too-late” (unspoken proclamations of love or the untimely death of a loved one [159]),² then *The Sixth Sense* actually *reverses* the too-late through the character’s return as a ghost for a second chance at love.³ While *Unbreakable*, *Signs*, and *The Village* don’t feature ghosts, each provides a variation of this scenario—a senseless tragedy and a redemptive second chance that effectively reverses the tragedy of being too late.

All four films feature characters in denial of some hidden truth, a truth that is revealed symptomatically through repeated “signs.” Signs in the semiotic sense are often understood to be ambiguous and culturally located, and indeed Shyamalan employs the multivalence of signs to ensure that a fundamental conflict revolves around characters who are constantly at risk of misinterpreting the clues around them, a fact that again links the films to traditional melodrama. As Christine Gledhill notes (drawing on Peter Brooks), “recognition and misrecognition are key devices of the melodramatic plot” (133). By the end of each film, however, the truth emerges, providing an objective answer to a narrative question posed by the film, one that hinges on a conundrum concerning the reality of a supernatural phenomenon. This is a question posed by much

fantasy and horror, as observed by Todorov in his seminal work on the fantastic. While each film raises a question regarding the reality of aliens, ghosts, monsters, or superhuman powers, in each case the characters are also challenged to read correctly the signs indicating a reality linked to their denial of emotion or of an emotional truth-state. In fact, all the films feature male characters who experience difficulty communicating their love and emotions to wives, girlfriends, or families. By the end of each film, the question of denied or lost love (romantic or familial) will be answered and relationships redeemed.⁴

In *The Sixth Sense*, Malcolm (Bruce Willis) is estranged from his wife Anna (Olivia Williams) and is portrayed as emotionally distant due to his obsession with work. Scene after scene portrays Malcolm coming home “too late,” with Anna already in bed, or Malcolm arriving too late for their anniversary dinner, for example. That Anna has felt neglected is, of course, a function of the fact that Malcolm is dead, but this neglect has also been established before his death when Anna tells Malcolm that he has put her second place behind his work. *Signs* offers a variation on this scenario. Whereas in *The Sixth Sense*, Malcolm cannot communicate with his wife because *he* is dead, in *Signs*, Graham’s (Mel Gibson) inability to communicate with his wife occurs because *she* is dead. When his attempts to communicate with her fail, he takes it as another sign that his earlier faith in God has been misguided. *Unbreakable* features a couple with a similar problem. At the beginning of the film, David (Bruce Willis) is



Malcolm at the cusp of a revelation

estranged from his wife (Robin Wright Penn) and seems unable to communicate his emotions. As they attempt to reconcile, Audrey asks David if he purposely keeps her and their son Joseph (Spencer Treat Clark) at a distance. He admits that he does, but cannot explain why. That they should be reconciled—that they *will* be reconciled—is foreshadowed by an emphasis on their son's anguish at their estrangement. After David emerges as the sole survivor of a train wreck (the inciting incident for the entire plot), Joseph places David and Audrey's hands together as they exit the hospital. A close-up of their clasped hands, followed by their obvious discomfort as they pull apart, establishes the fate of their relationship as a narrative and thematic element of the story.

While Shyamalan's main characters are portrayed as either emotionally blocked or isolated, the first three films feature supernatural interludes that assist the characters in resolving their personal dilemmas. Malcolm eventually expresses his love for his wife, allowing them both to move on with their destinies (her life and his release from being a ghost). David's traumatic experiences with his newfound superpowers eventually help him to embrace his true identity, which in turn allows him to reconnect with his wife. In both cases, the characters specifically refer to being given a "second chance." In *Signs*, Graham eventually understands that a critical communication between him and his wife has been unresolved since her death, and will remain so until he focuses on what she had been trying to convey. When he opens himself to her dying words, he restores his family, regains his faith, and moves on with his life.

The Village provides yet another variation on this same theme, once again featuring two male characters in denial of their emotions. Lucius (Joaquin Phoenix) has difficulty expressing himself to Ivy (Bryce Dallas Howard), and Edward (William Hurt) is unable to admit or express his feelings for Alice (Sigourney Weaver). Neither male character fully resolves the problem, but a turning point in the film occurs when Edward relents and permits Ivy to leave town because of her love for Lucius. Edward articulates for the elders the importance of love, suggesting that love is more powerful and more important than the defensive isolation that marks both his personal state and that of the village: "The world moves for love. It kneels before it in awe." If the village itself is emblematic of the misguided isolation that so many of Shyamalan's characters share, it is also therefore at this macro level that the film addresses the villagers' denial of reality. Unlike the other films, however, a question remains regarding the ultimate fate of the village, for the conclusion implies that the village will retain its isolated state, despite the events that have preceded it. I will return to this later, for while

the redemptive power of the truth is central to the other three movies, the ending of *The Village* is more complicated.

I confused things with their names: that is belief.

—Jean Paul Sartre

In Shyamalan's films, the characters' denials of emotional truths are connected to their inability to make sense of the signs and symptoms presented to them. In *Signs*, Graham initially doubts the existence of aliens, wondering if the crop circles are an elaborate hoax by local teenagers (or even a conspiracy on a global level). The film's title articulates an important concept that operates both textually and extratextually in all four movies where signs or symptoms provide an epistemological quandary related to supernatural phenomena. While only *The Village* explicitly explores the use of signs as a tool for disguising the truth, all the films remind us that signs can be misread or can be interpreted differently depending on the context. In *The Sixth Sense*, while the "symptoms" that Cole (Haley Joel Osment) exhibits—seeing ghosts—are ultimately validated by external reality (the ghosts are real), these same sightings mean something very different depending on whether one realizes that Malcolm is himself a ghost. The "signs" or clues are a type of red herring, intentionally designed to mislead the audience, and they are later subject to reinterpretation when a different context invites a new meaning. In a way, all four Shyamalan's films under discussion here are about this and, in each case, epistemological certainty is linked to an obsession with seeing or sight.

An emphasis on the visual is established in *The Sixth Sense* where the concept of "seeing" takes on multiple roles. It provides the initial conundrum for Cole who sees ghosts when nobody else in the film can. The audience, however, *does* see them and this visual evidence becomes one of several indexical indicators of the ghosts' existence. The term "see" also takes part in the doubled-reading of the film so that when Cole asks if he will "see" Malcolm again, seeing ghosts becomes conflated with seeing a psychologist. In *Unbreakable*, the importance of seeing is established early in the film when comic books provide the young Elijah (Johnny Hiram Jamison) with visually based stories that profoundly affect him. Seeing thus becomes a critical causal factor in the eventual crimes that the adult Elijah (Samuel L. Jackson) commits, for he believes that comic books signify an ancient wisdom, passed down through the ages. Elijah also explains that one can immediately recognize villains and heroes in a comic book just by understanding the visual conventions, such as the hero's square jaw, for example. Elijah's obsession with visual signs is established early and becomes relevant to David's dilemma as the film progresses. Only after David is no longer in

denial about his special “gift” does he begin to see what is going on, both literally and figuratively. What had previously seemed like mere intuition becomes real when snippets of crimes flash before his (and the viewers’) eyes. And he is simultaneously awakened to the importance of his relationship with his wife and ultimately to the true nature of his relationship with Elijah, so that “seeing” as a metaphor for understanding recalls the various puns in *The Sixth Sense*, including one where Cole tells Malcolm that ghosts only “see what they want to see,” foreshadowing the revelation that Malcolm has not seen the truth of his ghostly status.

Although the films emphasize sight and visual signs, an aural component often contributes to the suggestion of supernatural phenomena. In *The Sixth Sense*, the presence of ghosts is accompanied by eerie music, while the ghosts themselves express their distress verbally to Cole (and therefore to the audience). The distant screaming of Graham’s children is the first clue of something amiss in *Signs* and the film features a number of scenes in which mysterious sounds lead to a search for the visual confirmation of aliens. In one scene, for example, the family attempts to decipher the alien sounds being picked up by Bo’s (Abigail Breslin) old baby monitor. As in many films of horror and/or paranoia, strange sounds function either as the harbinger of a paranormal phenomenon or as the ambiguous sign that recalls Todorov’s “fantastic” conundrum—is a character delusional and “just hearing things” or is the phenomenon real?⁵

In *The Village*, the tension between hearing and seeing is revealed by a game that the youngsters play, turning their backs to the woods where the monsters supposedly lurk. How long will it take before they turn around and see for themselves whether the sounds they hear are actually made by monsters? Drawing on classic horror movie techniques, *The Village* thus often scares the characters (and arguably the audience) with scary monster sounds before confirming this interpretation with a visual sighting.

In the final analysis, “seeing is believing” and visual signs are understood to be important and final arbiters of truth, a fact exploited by the elders in *The Village*. But the notion that “seeing is believing” operates not just in the ontological sense, but also in the epistemological sense. The significance, for example, of the advice that Graham’s wife gives to Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix) before dying does not fully emerge until Graham comprehends the advice that she has given *him* (Graham) to “see.” The directive to “swing away” is at first understood as a pep talk for Merrill not to give up his dreams, but later also serves as a literal directive to save their family from the alien. Her advice to Graham may mean to “see Merrill’s bat on the wall,” or to “see that the bat can be used as a weapon.” But it also means to “see” in the more general sense implied in all the films—a

kind of seeing summed up in the quasi-religious sense of having faith—“having seen the light.” *The Village* makes this meaning explicit since Ivy is blind and yet several times she and others note that she does see, but in an extrasensory way.

Ivy’s blindness foregrounds the importance of sight, but explicitly links it to faith—an “in-sight” that extends beyond the material realm. Despite her blindness, Ivy claims she can see the color that Lucius emanates, using this fact to flirt with him. After Lucius is stabbed, it is her inability to see his color that confirms for Ivy that Lucius is critically wounded. Shyamalan’s tendency to play with color (red in *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable*, etc.) here becomes explicit in the plot: The villagers fear the color red since it supposedly attracts monsters, and they favor yellow, which is supposed to protect them. True, red is often associated with blood and danger and yellow with sunshine and light. But the epistemological problems surface once again. Is any given sign trustworthy? In this case, the film takes great pains to point out that the answer is no. The village elders (and Shyamalan himself) understand the power of manipulating the semiotic sphere, hoping that the iconic, indexical, and symbolic aspects will be conflated and therefore confused. Glimpses of a red-hooded creature “look like” a monster (hence an iconic sign); therefore, the villagers believe that they have seen a monster. Why would one see such a thing if the monsters weren’t really there? And why would there be skinned animals if the monsters didn’t really exist? But the indexical evidence is, of course, misunderstood because it is being manipulated by the elders, much the same way that story information and the aural and visual signs that produce it are manipulated in all of Shyamalan’s films.

If Shyamalan’s characters initially misread the signs that surround them, it is important to emphasize that when properly interpreted, these same signs will provide a possible antidote to the crisis created by the original calamitous event. Perhaps even more critical is that these initial events can be characterized not *just* as devastating crises for the characters, but as “senseless” tragedies. In *Unbreakable*, the senselessness of massive carnage from a freak train derailment is compounded by the fact that David is the only person to walk away unscathed. There is no rational explanation for either David’s survival or the accident. The car that kills Graham’s wife in *Signs* does not do so because the driver was drunk or reckless (distinct, identifiable causes of the crash), but because the driver has simply fallen asleep. And it is completely by chance that he does so just at the moment when he approaches her on an almost deserted road. In *The Village*, layers of senselessness begin with the death of a sick child at the film’s opening and then echo forward and backward in time to include the original

deaths that prompted the elders to create the village in the first place. The near-tragedy that occurs when Noah (Adrien Brody) stabs Lucius is motivated by Noah's jealousy over Ivy, and yet the rational nature of the cause is mitigated because of Noah's inability to comprehend what is, and what is not, appropriate behavior. Noah's actions thus echo the senseless violence that has prompted the creation of the village in the first place. Finally, *The Sixth Sense* shows Malcolm wracked with guilt over the suicide of his former patient, and yet he is completely at a loss to understand what went wrong. Indeed, Malcolm has, only just moments before, celebrated a civic award paying tribute to his *success* in helping his patients. The juxtaposition of these scenes is ironic and functions to underscore the complete and utter *incomprehensibility* of the suicide.⁶

Life is very nice, but has no shape. The object of art is actually to give it some and to do it by every artifice possible—truer than truth.

—Jean Anouilh

In each film, the characters fervently attempt to understand the cause of what has happened and try to give it some meaning. There is an implicit assumption here that if the tragedy itself only “meant something” then it could be overcome or forgiven, allowing the characters to move on. A sense of fate and even predetermination echoes the narrative structure of the films, as plot points presented early on return to play a part in the conclusion. One can see this most blatantly, perhaps, in *Signs* where the driver of the car that kills Graham's wife is not just anybody, but M. Night Shyamalan himself, an extratextual foreshadowing that this ostensibly random act of falling asleep will not remain completely unmotivated. (This event can also be read as a reference to a story that Malcolm tells Cole in *The Sixth Sense* in which a man finds himself “driving and driving . . . it was a long trip . . . he fell asleep . . .”) Here, Shyamalan's auteur persona embodies the Godlike role that an author/director plays in manipulating the fate of his characters so that when redemption is achieved at the end of the film, it will be linked to the storytelling role of Shyamalan himself (on this point, see Weinstock in this volume). Redemption is achieved precisely because Graham makes the connection between the words of his dying wife and the seemingly senseless, and literally “out of the blue,” appearance of hostile aliens. And if what Graham loses and regains is his sense of faith, this is related to his failed attempts to give meaning to tragedy, a situation that Shyamalan contrives to create (through the death of Graham's wife) so that Graham must first forsake but then regain his sense of purpose and meaning at the end of the film.

Each of the films thus presents a kind of circular causality that trades on irony, where the outcome of an action—or an entire narrative—is the *opposite* of what one would expect (sometimes called situational or cosmic irony). Thus, in *Signs*, the tragedy at the beginning of the movie causes Graham's loss of faith but, ironically, also prompts the very words that enable Graham to defeat the aliens and thereby *regain* his faith. Whereas the initial premise in *The Sixth Sense* is that Malcolm is alive and helping a little boy who sees ghosts, the conclusion is only possible *because* Cole sees ghosts. If Cole couldn't see ghosts, then he couldn't interact with Malcolm and he would not be able help Malcolm reach his own narrative conclusion, which hinges on admitting that Malcolm is *himself* a ghost. A further irony emerges when we understand that, while Malcolm believes he is trying to provide therapy to a little boy, it is *he* who actually needs therapy to overcome his denial of the truth. In *Unbreakable*, it is Elijah himself who causes the tragedies that provoke David's superpowers to emerge. Elijah in some sense *must* do so because, as he explains, "It all makes sense. In the comics, you know who the arch villain is going to be? He's the exact opposite of the hero! And most times they're friends like you and me." Thus, in the binary and tautological structure of superhero identities, David is designated as a protector and his opposite, Elijah, is destined to be the cause of the evil events that David fights against. David's wife also expresses a sense of predetermined fate when she explains that her aversion to the violence of football was addressed by the car accident that ended David's football career. She sees this as an example of "fate stepping in," saying, "If that hadn't happened, we wouldn't have been together." She's right, but not in the way that she believes. Ironically, David forsakes football not because he was injured, but because he was *not* injured and does not want to admit this for fear of losing Audrey.

In *The Village*, the elders' tragic experiences with the deaths of their loved ones have caused them to create the lie that constitutes their community. It is also, ironically, the cause of new tragedies as it is implied that Ivy would not have gone blind, and the boy at the beginning of the film might have lived, if the community members had not cut themselves off from modern medicine. More irony is to come. First, despite walling themselves off from the world in an attempt to avoid crime and violence, the most emotionally wrenching act of violence comes from within their own community when Noah stabs Lucius. An additional irony occurs when Ivy inadvertently kills Noah—ironic since it is only *because* she goes to "the towns" that this confrontation occurs and yet Noah's death now provides anew the possibility that no one will ever go to the town again. The villagers will believe (as Ivy did) that a wild beast from the woods attacked her and they will continue

to isolate themselves in the village. Thus, ironically, the exposure of the lie also assures the very continuation of the lie.⁷

It is important to note that—as with signs in general—the term irony itself can connote a number of things depending on the context. Thus, an alternate understanding emerges when the term “dramatic irony” is invoked to describe a classic technique used to create suspense. Here, the viewer or reader is provided with critical information to which the character is not privy (Perrine 224). Shyamalan may be known for his suspense films—and indeed is frequently compared to Hitchcock, but—ironically—his stories do not rely as heavily on this type of irony as one might expect. Thus, in *The Sixth Sense*, even though the viewers see ghosts and Malcolm does not, the suspense created by this rift in knowledge is not ultimately sustained *as* dramatic irony because it does not result in, *but is a distraction from*, the situational or cosmic irony that is the hallmark of the film, namely that Malcolm is not alive, but dead.

The term dramatic irony might be better applied to the *viewer's* situation in that, far from knowing more than the characters, these movies typically “know” more than the viewer. Only in revisiting the story events can we see that, like the characters, the viewers themselves are constantly at risk of misreading the signs. In this sense, we must acknowledge (again, ironically) that the term irony can come to mean almost the opposite of itself depending on the context. Dramatic irony is a vehicle for suspense that delays expected results and puts the viewer in a privileged knowledge position. Situational or cosmic irony, on the other hand, is a vehicle for surprise, characterized by unexpected or opposite results that are made possible, in part, by *depriving* the viewer of information. All forms of irony, however, are marked by a disjunction between one thing and another, between an apparent meaning and an absent or opposite one (Colebrook 25). This leads us back to the epistemological uncertainty experienced by both the characters and the viewers who consistently face the “doubleness of sense or meaning” that is a hallmark of all irony (13), and likewise of the Shyamalan films discussed here.

I show you doubt, to prove that faith exists.

—Robert Browning

It would be tempting to conclude that Shyamalan's obsession with doubled readings and the polyvalence of signs is an expression of post-modern doubt about meaning or certainty. And yet ironically, all of these films trade on the polyvalence of signs not so much to question meaning, but to reinforce a *preferred* one. Typically, the characters must embrace and accept a supernatural truth that dovetails with the restoration of

meaning and with some sort of emotional reconciliation. Unlike the other films, *The Village* undercuts a belief in supernatural phenomena, and yet, through its insistence that the villagers are better off believing in monsters, it too suggests that “senseless-ness” can be overcome *if* the characters simply “believe,” as the tagline for *Signs* mandated. Ironically, the type of belief Shyamalan encourages in each of these films is itself ambiguous. No specific religious belief or faith is referenced—although *Signs* arguably privileges a Christian paradigm. For Shyamalan, belief may have more to do with “faith” in stories and in the logic of Hollywood narratives than it does with traditional notions of faith.

And it is precisely the logic of the classical Hollywood film that is at stake here. Shyamalan’s attempts to manipulate this logic are at the heart of both the praise and criticism his films have received. Following David Bordwell’s neoformalist approach to Hollywood films, we can make a distinction between the *fabula* and *syuzhet*, where the former denotes the viewer’s inferred causally related story events and the latter denotes the actual presentation of those events. The *syuzhet* includes everything from dialogue to camera compositions and other narrative and cinematic techniques that reveal, restrict, or otherwise manipulate story information. As the *syuzhet* cues the reader to formulate hypotheses about *fabula* information, the viewer attempts to find coherence and unity as the film progresses. Indeed, as Bordwell says, all narratives “are composed in order to reward, modify, frustrate, or defeat the perceiver’s search for coherence” (38). In mystery and detective stories, the presentation of clues is understood to be intentionally polyvalent or ambiguous, their function being precisely to engage the viewer or reader in a game of inferences. As Moretti has said of classic detective novels, the detective “will have to reinstate the univocal links between signifiers and signifieds . . . The criminal produces the *syuzhet*, the detective the *fabula*” (146). In many Shyamalan films, the quasi-detective role is assumed by the protagonists as they attempt to come to grips with a supposed supernatural phenomenon. Viewers share this role when the *syuzhet* provides only the same information that the main character knows, depriving them both of *fabula* information revealed by the end of the film. Alternately, when the *syuzhet* reveals information to the audience, but denies it to the protagonist, viewers shift from playing detective to experiencing the suspense created by waiting for the characters to learn or accept a critical truth. As noted, the tension between these two functions provides the *modus operandi* of *The Sixth Sense*, where viewers may believe themselves to be waiting in suspense for Malcolm to “catch on” to what they already know to be true (the existence of ghosts), while not realizing

that the *syuzhet* is carefully distracting them from questioning all the other “clues” that will eventually reveal the “real” truth of the *fabula*.

The hype surrounding *The Sixth Sense* and the promotions for *Unbreakable* encouraged viewers to believe that *Unbreakable* would likewise deliver a story about supernatural or paranormal events. But while the *syuzhet* cues us to wait for David to accept his superpowers, it does not encourage us to question the cause of the accidents that provide the catalyst for David’s discovery. Just as Malcolm is at first presented as being simply the person who can help Cole resolve his problem, Elijah is initially positioned simply as the person who will help David come to grips with his true identity. And yet, as we discover, these roles are not what they seem. Malcolm is not just the helper, but also the one who needs help. Elijah does not just help *solve* David’s dilemma, but has actually *created* it by causing the accidents that provoke David’s crisis at the beginning of the film.

The distinction between the *fabula* and the *syuzhet* provides a handy way of grasping the mechanism of narratives that depend heavily on manipulating or withholding information from the audience for the purposes of creating suspense or surprise. However, the distinction is itself as much of a red herring as many of the clues are, for to assume a separate reality of a given *fabula* is to ignore an essential truth—that *there is no fabula apart from the syuzhet*. The *fabula* (the story) is created by and is a function of the *syuzhet*. To paraphrase Lacan, when Shyamalan pulls a rabbit out of a hat, it is because he put it there in the first place, a gimmick that Malcolm’s penny trick in *The Sixth Sense* illustrates by proving that the penny has been in his hand all along.

This pertains to the sense that some Shyamalan films, particularly *Signs*, were “overly” contrived in their presentation. It is no secret to audiences that information provided at the beginning of Hollywood films usually pays off at the end. This dramatic technique follows a long tradition and has become so clichéd that some refer to it as “Chekhov’s gun”: If you put a gun in the first act, you must use it in the last act (and conversely, if you use a gun in the last act, you must introduce it in the first act). This is also referred to as the “plant” and the “payoff” and most screenwriting manuals echo this advice. Yet, *Signs* did not strike some viewers as plausible possibly because it was, on the one hand, a bit too mechanical, and on the other hand, not mechanical enough. As with *Unbreakable*, the audience is expecting otherworldly events and waits for Graham to stop denying the existence of aliens. Each character is associated with a “plant”—water, asthma, batting, or seeing—and each plant pays off by the end of the film. Repeated scenes of Bo’s water obsession cue the audience to hypothesize a

connection between common tap water and aliens, a connection that ultimately proves deadly for the intruders. Similarly, other movies such as *War of the Worlds* (1953/2005) and *The Blob* (1958/1988) rely on mundane solutions to thwart alien invaders—common germs in the first case and freezing temperatures in the second. Such stories provide generic motivation that may help justify this simple story element and make the payoff seem plausible. If some of the other payoffs seem contrived, then it may be the result of insufficient motivation, an important component of the classical Hollywood formula, which Shyamalan manipulates so well in *The Sixth Sense*. Fantastic and supernatural stories are not required to be “realistic” but elements of the plot must be connected to one another and be “redundantly” motivated to help make the film internally consistent (Bordwell et al. 19). Taken as a whole, however, *Signs* provides too few causal or thematic connections among the plants themselves. It is important to remember that the point of the movie concerns less the triumph over evil aliens and more the restoration of Graham’s family and his faith in God. In fact, the characters in this film experience a great deal of the alien invasion by watching it passively on television, a “sign” to us that it is their and Graham’s reaction that are the focus, not the aliens themselves. But what, after all, is the connection between baseball, water, asthma, aliens, and Graham’s faith? The unifying factor is *only* the wife’s dying words, and yet this connection, revealed at the very end of the film, seems “too little too late.” All four of the films discussed here rely on visual and/or aural flashbacks at the end so that the audience can reconsider the meaning of earlier story events. Yet in this film, the link between a grieving husband and aliens does not seem adequately connected or motivated *throughout* the movie. As with Bo’s water, one might posit an intertextual suggestion that alien encounters can inspire a type of spiritual awe, as seen in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) for example. (The scene in which Graham breaks down at the dinner table while shoving mashed potatoes down his throat is clearly a reference to this film.) This intertextual motivation is undercut, however, by the murderous intent of the aliens as opposed to the angelic, benevolent qualities that characterize those in *Close Encounters*. It is one thing to equate religious faith with benevolent higher beings, but why would one wish to have faith in hostile invaders from another planet? Since Graham himself articulates a connection between fear and a lack of belief (see below), the thematic relationship between malevolent aliens and spiritual faith makes little sense.

Signs thus invites viewers to dwell on the ambiguity of signs but does not provide enough redundancy and motivation early on to make a rereading of the clues eventually cohere, as they do so well in *The Sixth Sense*.

Because the payoffs have not been adequately “contrived,” they (ironically) seem *too* contrived. This problem is exacerbated when the characters explicitly state the main theme of the film. As Graham explains, there are only two kinds of people: those who believe in miracles thus signaling hope, and those who don’t and are thus destined to fear, (words that are also needlessly repeated at the end of the film). Shyamalan’s character, Ray, also states the obvious. Just moments after suggesting that it was mere coincidence that he fell asleep at the wheel just as Colleen was walking by, Ray adds, “It’s like it was meant to be.” This phrase is echoed by Colleen herself at the end of the film when we are privy to Graham’s flashback of the accident. Here, instead of following Hollywood formula, Shyamalan actually violates another well-known rule of screenwriting—never tell when you can show. And so another irony emerges. Having spent so long exploring the ambiguity of signs, Shyamalan does not trust the viewer to understand his intended meaning.

While *The Village* did not suffer from the same gaps in causal motivation that bothered some viewers of *Signs*, it too disappointed many viewers and critics. Why? Because Shyamalan’s audience has been repeatedly cued to expect supernatural phenomena. If the monsters aren’t real, then what’s the point? We expect Shyamalan to pull some sort of supernatural “rabbit” out of the hat, but instead we again get the equivalent of Malcolm’s penny trick when the monsters prove to be fake. This then is the real twist of the film—and the joke is on us. If the previous films invited viewers to reconsider clues and story events in order to correct an earlier misreading, perhaps we should reread our idea of what this film is “supposed” to be. True, many viewers correctly read the signs within the film (having being well trained) and therefore immediately guessed that the monsters weren’t real. Yet if this “revelation” is only seen as the (not-so-surprising) twist to the film, it distracts us from the other emotional and dramatic aspects of the film.

As I have argued, Shyamalan films bear resemblance to classic melodramas through their emphasis on tragedy and miscommunication in family settings. And like traditional melodrama, they may also be considered unrealistic or contrived. As noted, this has been fed, in part, by Shyamalan’s own obvious enjoyment at his auteur status and by his self-conscious manipulation of Hollywood conventions. But rereading Shyamalan films as melodramas and not just horror stories suggests a different appreciation of *The Village*, for as Gledhill states, “What to a realist looks like contrivance and rigged evidence is for the melodramatist the orchestration of dramatic roles and theatrical signs in order to produce a total signifying configuration” (138). For Shyamalan, this total signifying

configuration has everything to do with the threatened destruction and subsequent restoration of meaning in the characters' worlds. The circular design of all of these films can therefore be seen not so much as contrivance but as a plea for sense and sincerity in a cynical world. Just as *Signs* was never really about aliens, *The Village* was never really about monsters. It is, at heart, a morality tale with a sad irony and a bittersweet conclusion. While the audience learns that the monsters are an illusion created by the elders, the elders learn that monsters external to themselves are also an illusion and that the monster is within. No matter how isolated they may be, the villagers will never be safe from pain, violence, and death. Ironically, this knowledge does not serve as a catalyst for change as it does in the other three movies. While the elders know that the monsters are only a fabrication, the implication is that they will continue to perpetuate this myth. Why? Because both the elders and Shyamalan himself seem to conclude that a positive, therapeutic function is served by this collective fiction. Shyamalan knows that movies are not so much about truth and lies (another red herring), but about the value of the stories we tell ourselves. This reflexive impulse creates a tension in all four films, all of which are structured tautologically through their binary opposites and doubled meanings to first question but then reinstate semantic unity, the place where "belief" lies.⁸

Belief in the therapeutic effect of storytelling links Shyamalan with psychologist Dan P. McAdams who documents the way in which Americans routinely describe their lives as if they were protagonists in their own movie. Like Shyamalan's characters, many of his subjects describe how they managed to escape or overcome some type of suffering or senseless tragedy. Because they believe they have been given a "second chance" they also believe that they have a duty to help others. Many see themselves as blessed with one or more "gifts," just as Shyamalan's characters help others with *their* special gifts, whether it be psychic (or psychiatric) ability, superpowers, a gift for spiritual guidance, or the know-how to create an idyllic village. By putting their lives in narrative form, McAdams's subjects make sense of tragic events and redeem their own place in the larger "story" of life.

Whether successful or not, Shyamalan's intended "gift" to the viewer appears to be just such a belief in the power of cinematic storytelling. All four films tell melodramatic stories designed to restore meaning and hope to characters who have lost their way. In witnessing these stories, it is implied that we will understand the value of this search for meaning in our own lives ("Believe!"). As Elijah opines, "You know what the scariest thing is? To not know your place in the world." All four of Shyamalan movies address this fundamental dilemma. The suggestion

to cynical viewers is that our own messy lives are merely the surface *syuzhet* for some more important but hidden *fabula*. But we just can't see it. Oh, the irony.

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NOTES

1. Steve Neale notes that melodrama is often contrasted with realism "to imply a failure of plausibility" (186). Christine Gledhill writes, "Melodrama is accused of contrivance and a reliance on devices such as coincidence in order to make its plots arrive at a satisfying denouement" (138).
2. Franco Moretti describes melodrama as "moving literature," a type of literature that moves the reader to cry (157).
3. A number of nonhorror ghost and angel films such as *Ghost* (1990), *Always* (1989), and *The Preacher's Wife* (1996) follow this pattern (see Fowkes 1998 and 2004). While I see Shyamalan films as types of melodramas, it might be more accurate to say they are a type of neomelodrama, drawing much of their shape and meaning from melodrama but ultimately reversing the melodramatic impulse for tears, as described by Moretti.
4. This occurs less obviously in *The Village*, where Edward (William Hurt) feels guilty about Ivy's (Bryce Dallas Howard) blindness but is able partially to redeem himself by allowing her to go to town to get medicine for the proclaimed love of her life, Lucius (Joaquin Phoenix).

5. An interesting variation occurs in *Unbreakable*, where visual confirmations are not linked so much to sound as they are to the *lack* of sound. After David (Bruce Willis) has discovered his superhuman strength, he begins to experience psychic interludes that reveal the criminal actions of those around him. Here, David's sonic environment temporarily fades away, allowing David (and the audience) to focus on visions of people secretly committing crimes. (See also Sterritt in this volume.)
6. Note that in the *The Sixth Sense*, both Vincent (Donnie Wahlberg) and Cole are referred to as freaks. Their "symptoms" cannot be explained, just as David's symptoms (or, ironically, lack thereof) cannot be accounted for. Their freakishness is linked to all the tragic events in these films because they initially confound explanation and have no apparent rational cause or meaning.
7. All four films work to conflate the characters' misconceptions and subsequent discoveries of truth with those of the audience. While both the characters and the viewers may initially misread the signs in *The Village*, here the film's "revelation" of the truth is for the benefit of the audience, not the inhabitants of the village.
8. The doubled reading that structures *The Sixth Sense* and Malcolm's dual identity (psychologist and ghost) gives way to the binary superhero/villain in *Unbreakable*, where David and Elijah are inextricably linked from birth. In *Signs*, a different binary emerges through Graham's belief that there are only two kinds of people (a false binary upon which the movie hangs its hat). *The Village* also presents a binary since only two choices seem to exist for the villagers. They must be either fully of the outside world or completely isolated within the village.

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CHAPTER 6

THE NIGHT BOOK, OR THE MIRROR AND THE PAGE

EMMANUEL BURDEAU

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH BY FRED CASSIDY

PART I

IN THE OPENING SCENE OF *SIGNS* (2002), GRAHAM (MEL GIBSON) is startled awake. He sits up in bed, stands in the bathroom doorway, holds his toothbrush in his mouth. He presses his ear against the children's bedroom door. Surprised, inquisitive. What is he doing? We don't know. What is happening? He himself would not be able to explain. Graham has been summoned by "something" he doesn't know. He is not even sure that there is "something" or that there could be a *sign*. But the order of things has been disrupted and his intelligence has been set in motion. The pajamas, the bare feet, the toothbrush, the hurry in his movements all give Graham an air of bewilderment yet focus, like a child playing hide and seek or "red light, green light." Man on the lookout. Man at play. Man being played. Man watching. Man being watched. The film can now begin.

If M. Night Shyamalan has not invented this type of situation, he has systemized it to the point of giving it a signature status, but also that of a test. Those who only read in Graham's awakening gaze a sluggishness and haggardness—or on the contrary a ridiculous childishness—have little chance to appreciate the films of this director. Those who see qualities of focus and abandon—of activity and passiveness—are most inclined to appreciate these films. Better yet: they are more inclined to become just as bewildered as its hero—be it in the case of *Unbreakable* (2000), *Signs*, or *Lady in the Water* (2006).

A few minutes after he wakes, the former reverend Graham says to the policewoman (Cherry Jones) who has come to inquire about the incidents in the field: “Shh, I can’t hear my children anymore.” This is the gaze, the gaze of M. Night Shyamalan: a gaze that listens. A gaze that listens to its own perception: both sharp and intermittent. Incisive and murky. When one person rises abruptly from bed, another one, Graham’s younger brother Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix), literally falls from his! Something is in suspension. Movement and stillness in frame. Electricity and blackout. On and Off. Arms dangling and bare feet, mouth agape, eyes wide open, a furrowed brow with wrinkles of worry: it’s as if the body freezes into a posture of bewilderment. As if, when everything freezes, the gaze turns to two directions simultaneously: toward the exterior to the event that is about to tear or has already torn the sky, and toward the interior to a man searching to understand what is happening and whose premonition senses that the answer is deep within and perhaps nowhere else. It is a self-reflexive gaze, listening to the listening. His bewilderment is both the launching point and the interruption: it’s pure suspense.

We know this look by heart, even if it is difficult to describe accurately. It is the look Bruce Willis gives when he realizes he is dead in the final minutes of *The Sixth Sense* (1999). It is the look the same actor gives in the opening minutes of the next film, *Unbreakable*, when he realizes that he is the only person to have escaped a train wreck on the New York-to-Philadelphia line unscathed, without so much as a scratch. It is the look Mel Gibson gives at the opening of *Signs*, and that of Joaquin Phoenix at the same moment, and again, in *The Village* (2004) . . . It is the look of a man, or less frequently of a woman, when faced with a particular incident that transforms him into an investigator, into a reader: the world subsequently becomes a question, an enigma. It is also the look of a man who, because of this incident, becomes an enigma for the spectator—as well as for his own eyes. The face—be it that of Willis, Gibson, Phoenix, Giamatti, Wahlberg—becomes a question that we, spectators and characters in the film, must answer. By this look, the actor becomes a reader. By this look, the reader becomes the text itself. By this look, something has become legible. Better yet: by this look, something beckons us to read into it.

What exactly? At this juncture we still have no idea. But we already know that the central enigma at the root of each M. Night Shyamalan film is one that does not only need a resolution. This enigma is also a question about the enigma itself and its resolution, a question about the origin and goal of reading, of deciphering. If there is bewilderment, if the gaze turns inward and outward, it is because nothing is clear, not even the call to decipher it. Nothing but this, and this is essential at this stage: we

are all suddenly here, astonished as on the very first day. Astonished to exist and astonished to be astonished. Awoken, reawoken. Born anew to a grand day of bewilderment.

PART II

The mirror shot in the opening scene of *Unbreakable* shows the birth of Elijah Price (played at age thirteen by Johnny Hiram Jamison, played as an adult by Samuel L. Jackson) in a department store in Philadelphia. The following scene shows David Dunn (Bruce Willis) in a train, briefly resting his head on the window—his image reflected in the glass—moments before the wreck that catalyses the story. Two scenes, two mirrors. There are always two stories at work in M. Night Shyamalan films; one is the reflection of another: the power of an unbreakable superhero and the impotence of an infinitely broken man. They are symmetrical; they watch each other through the mirror. Each story is, as was just briefly noted, the reflection of itself. It is not enough to advance the idea that a story illuminates—explains, turns to metaphor, reads, translates—the Other. We have to add that each story illuminates its Self; explains itself, turns itself to metaphor . . .

More generally, we can say that each M. Night Shyamalan film contains two scenarios, two fables: one belongs to order of the “family fable,” one to “genre” filmmaking. On one hand we have melodrama and, on the other, science fiction or horror. In *The Sixth Sense*, a man is separated from his wife and a child is condemned to live among ghosts. In *Unbreakable*, a man finds his place little by little as a father and husband but the film is also a superhero story in the same vein as numerous films since 2000, such as the *Spider-man* films (2002, 2004, 2007), the *X-Men* franchise (2000, 2003, 2006, 2009), and the *Hulk* films (2003, 2008). In *Signs*, again, a father reintegrates his position as such and we also have an extraterrestrial invasion. In *The Village*, a romantic story with Lucius (Joaquin Phoenix) and Ivy (Bryce Dallas Howard) is set against a costume tale that allegorizes our contemporary situation, namely with respect to the Iraq war: the “genre” of the film is as much fable as political-fiction. In *The Lady in the Water*, we witness the journey of Cleveland Heep (Paul Giamatti), a man who is regaining his faith in life after the death of his loved ones, but also the tale of a nymph named Story (Bryce Dallas Howard). Again, we have the family on one side, the supernatural on the other. In *The Happening* (2008), the story of the couple (the Moores, played by Mark Wahlberg and Zoey Deschanel) that gets back together is set against a new invasion in the tradition of classic horror films.

All of this is schematic and common knowledge. Most American fiction films function on the same principal of the dual scenario: every adventure, even when the fate of entire world is in balance, is first and perhaps foremost a means for the hero to gain confidence in himself, regain his spouse, reclaim the affection of his son, and so on. The family fable in these cases is a subgroup of the horror or science fiction fable: when the storm is at its apex, it is the journey that counts. And only when everything is resolved do we understand that the act of saving the planet, literally, is a means for the hero to be saved spiritually. But this is not the case for M. Night Shyamalan. Without pertaining to a subgroup or hierarchy, the family fable is not inscribed in the horror or science fiction scenario. During the first two-thirds of *Unbreakable*, each story seems to be writing itself independently from the other. On one hand, Price methodically convinces Dunn that he could be a superhero. On the other, without an apparent causal effect, he invites his wife to dinner and reenacts their first date. On the film's horizon we see a coherent possibility that these two scenarios may exist together, but we also see that this coherence is not part of traditional film conventions.

Take *The Sixth Sense*, for example. What happens when Dr. Malcolm Crowe realizes that he is actually dead, that he is simply one of the many ghosts to whom the young Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment) brings solace? He understands that he will only be at peace when he can finally say good-bye to his wife. We understand that for an hour and a half we were accompanying a dead man. He understands, we understand. The revelation doesn't change anything other than bringing forth understanding.

Take *Unbreakable*. What happens when David Dunn accepts his superhero status? He understands that he will only escape the unhappiness he feels in his waking hours—awake again, always awake—when he accepts his destiny. When he finally sheds his unhappiness, he will be able to lead the family life to which he aspires. He understands. In *The Sixth Sense*, he thought he was alive but he was dead. In *Unbreakable*, he thought he was dead—apathetic, in despair—but he was alive and a superhero no less. There have been many discussions about the reputed plot “twists” in these two films. However, the essential has often been overlooked. The twists do not modify what you have seen, but only how you make sense of them. They don't modify the image, but the gaze you have on the image.

If Shyamalan has progressively abandoned stories with a twist, it is undoubtedly because the formula was at risk of being overused. But it is also because twists are everywhere in his films. Every scene begs the question of the gaze: what do you see? Unlike the question posed in the 1980s and 1990s—is what you see the truth or a lie?—these questions are

of another order: what is the meaning of what you are seeing? More precisely, do you recognize the question in what you are watching? A question being posed to you and no one else? Is the echo of this question—a question squared, if you will, or the question of a question—what Malcolm Crowe and David Dunn progressively become aware of? Crowe understands that the patient is not Cole, or at least not the only one: he himself is a patient as well. Dunn understands that Elijah could be right: he hasn't yet become who he is.

We can now explain what links the family fable and the genre scenarios for M. Night Shyamalan. And we can explain also why spectators can be so inspired at the start of his films and so disappointed by the end of them, as if they had been betrayed somewhere along the way. There is an enigma, but the point is not to elucidate it. The injunction lies in something else: it is about understanding. Understanding what? Simply understanding, that's all. To enter the kingdom of signs.

Take *Signs* for that matter. The former reverend Graham doesn't regain his stature as a father for having triumphed against the invading aliens who attacked his family. That sentence is too simple and causal. He triumphs from the moment he realizes that the invasion is a challenge to his faith, a challenge to his position as a real and symbolic father. It's not in becoming a hero that he becomes a father to his children again, to his community of faithful followers. He reclaims his position because he understands that what is at stake in the heroic venture is his role as a father. He reclaims his position because he understands that Merrill's bat on the wall, the glasses of water placed by Bo (Abigail Breslin), Morgan's (Rory Culkin) asthma—everything had a purpose for existing. They are all weapons needed to fight the *alien*. Where, since his wife's passing, he saw only chaos and coincidence, he now sees purpose.

To take it a step further, the invasion carries a message but the message is specular, mirrorlike. Nothing more than a shadow on an unlit television screen—a beautiful image!—nothing more than a reflection on a mirror. The *alien* on the prowl in the Hess family room is at the same time the catalyst for regaining meaning in this world. In the end, all the danger amounted to that goal: to awaken a belief. A belief that enables one to vanquish danger, this one and all the others perhaps. The circle is closed. The *alien* has arrived to be vanquished. He has arrived so that Graham may regain his faith.

If the film's title is *Signs*, it is not to hint a way to decode the story. The signs are not signifying anything other than themselves. That the world is a text is something Graham had chosen to deny since his wife's death. But he rediscovers this again, as if it were the first day. That each person has a

place in the text and this text is the result of everyone's place with respect to it—this is the sole revelation. Shyamalan restates this forcefully in *Lady in the Water*, in which each person in The Cove residence must find his or her place in the preexisting schema. It is then simply a matter of recomposing it. There is a design, a design that is also a destiny. That is all we need to learn. All we need to relearn. All that we need to remember.

The narrative art of Shyamalan is unique in contemporary cinema: he profoundly redirects a “genre cinema” in the space of a family fable scenario. The resolution of the intrigue is the work by which the hero must come to understand that the genre scenario is his express destiny. Heroism here is the work of a “hermeneute”: to help pass signs from one order to another. Each film proceeds as long as it takes for the two scenarios to find each other, to observe each other, to read each other. As soon as they do, everything stops. When the film rejoins itself, the narrative is over.

Shyamalan's fables are circular. They don't discover anything new; they turn onto themselves, look at themselves in the mirror. They don't go anywhere; they take a spin and assume their original position. They can last forever or just an instant. The resolution that comes after an hour and a half is also always within reach. The act of rejoining itself can only occur if you posit that the schema is already traced and it is simply a matter of finding it anew.

This is why the mobilization of signs coincides constantly with its opposite, the immobilization, a disappearance even. The heights of his cinema are attained when, in one gesture, something is inscribed and erased, written and unwritten. Remember—and it may be a detail, true, but a world of signs is made of just that, details—remember the fingerprints left by Cole's hand, for one second on the kitchen table, noticed only by his mother who sees them evaporate. Remember the confrontation between the murderer (Chance Kelly) in *Unbreakable* and Dunn wearing his green overcoat: the latter pushes into the wall leaving a print, like a mold of his body, a hollow form of writing, a signature. At the same time, Dunn is about to fly just like a superhero. He is weighted and weightless. Inscribed and erased. He signs and signs no more.

The enigma is always on the verge of falling into the absence of enigma. The effort Dunn has to make to accept himself as a superhero is the effort to (re)discover himself is a zero sum effort, an effort without measure. Even more radically, it is the effort that Dunn needs to make to recognize himself as virginal, superhuman, unbreakable: free of all effort. In other words, exempt of all history except the impotence embodied by Elijah Price. Like he himself remarks, finally, relieved, justified, the symmetry between the two is what restores equilibrium. It confirms the nonabsurdity

of the world. But it is also something else: a pure reflection ad infinitum. Again, circular, specular. All of Shyamalan's films possess this quality: the revelation is a 180-degree turn, a cancellation. Interpretation is always an act of erasing. As the film progresses, it regresses back to its original state. The film unveiling before our eyes is also a work that, methodically, is unraveling: therein lies, perhaps, his most profound enigma.

PART III

The opening scene of *The Happening* takes place one morning in Central Park. Two young women (played by Alison Folland and Kristen Connolly) sit on a bench. One holds a book (Folland) and says, "I forgot where I am." The other responds, "You are at the place where the killers meet and decide what to do with the crippled girl." Pause. A gust of wind passes. "What page was I on?" This single word, belabored: "page." A few seconds later, the girl holding the book plants her hairpin into her throat—this object may as well be a stiletto or a long pen, and this suicide a brutal way for her not to lose her page!

In M. Night Shyamalan films, reading—the labor of reading, the pleasure of reading, the questions of reading—is not just a metaphor, as stated previously, with bewildered looks or the mirrorlike relationship between the dual scenarios. It is also a literal act: books in hand, lost or found pages, recitations. It is through a *mind reading* exercise that Dr. Crowe begins to soften Cole's resistance. Later, we discover Cole's furious red writings dictated by the dead. Elijah Price is owner of a boutique called "Limited Edition" and considers comics to be art, literature. As the story unravels in *Signs*, it seems to conform to the strange hypotheses described and illustrated in the science fiction novel bought by Morgan. The schema exists already; it's just a matter of finding the page. In *The Village*, Lucius is first introduced paper in hand, reading to the elders a message that ironically, at least for the spectator, finishes with the words "The End." In the *Lady in the Water*, when Story must meet a writer (Vick, played by Shyamalan himself), Cleveland Heep makes the rounds in the complex and discovers that almost everyone has a relationship to writing: Mr. Farber (Bob Balaban), the atrocious film critic; Mrs. Bell (Mary Beth Hurt), a writer of an out-of-print novel; Mr. Dury (Jeffrey Wright), a master of crossword puzzles; his son Joey (Noah Grey-Cabey), who reads cereal boxes like some read the stars in night skies. Even the slackers (played by Joseph D. Reitman, Ethan Cohn, Jared Harris, Grant Monohon, and John Boyd) who confess "no essays here, my man" play word games, searching for new expressions they can repeat, like "blim blam," for example. In the basement, Cleveland crosses Vick who has

spent the last six months cataloging “thoughts on cultural problems, on our leaders.” His work is modestly, even absurdly, entitled “the Cook Book.” He is the writer searching for Story. At the same time, Story discovers another book on the shelf—a secret journal—in which Heep explains how his wife and children were murdered, his despair, his guilt for not having been there to save them.

There are two books in *The Lady in the Water*: the book by the filmmaker and the book by the character. The political book and the “family” book. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that Heep, and not Vick, is central to the mechanism that needs to be in place to help Story rejoin the Blue World, to return peace and coherence to the community of The Cove. The entire thrust of the film consists, yet again, in moving from one book to another, from the book that vows to change the world to the one whose sole purpose is to appease a man’s personal suffering. Let us repeat: to read is to operate a transfer from one text to another. It is a translation (the word having two meanings, both the act of displacement and the act of translating words—a journey on one hand and the examination of meaning on the other).

The opening scene of the film shows Heep with a broomstick in hand, his head in the closet. Behind him stands a father (George Bass) with his five daughters (played by Maricruz Hernandez, Carla Jimenez, Natasha Perez, Monique Bagriela Cumen, and Marilyn Torres). Each time Heep swings the broom at the beast in the closet—nothing more than a cockroach in all likelihood—the five girls scream in Spanish, expressing fear, encouragement, and gratitude. Their father translates their words for Heep. Translation, in Shyamalan films, operates like reading. It is both real and metaphoric. It is metaphoric when it serves to inscribe one fable into the order of another (to put the Beast back in the closet, one could say). Or when the passion of the filmmaker for the “strange” coincides with the focus he places on the “stranger” within. David Dunn is confronted by a “superhumanity” that was unknown to him: the more he accepts his superhero-ness the more he becomes the “other” or an “alien” (in this sense, his all-powerfulness is also passivity, abandon: impotence). In *Signs*, clues suggest—through similar camera frames and superimpositions of screams—that there is no other alien than Graham, than what he has become to himself and his family. He and he alone must relearn how to come back to earth by restoring his faith in the heavens.

Translation, however, is not a metaphor when Shyamalan tries to speak other languages and connect to other people of the world—as when he delivers his thoughts on our “cultural problems.” It is an aspect that is not studied much but that merits our attention. In fact, we should add a

third scenario to the two previous ones mentioned: a scenario concerning a political or social dimension regarding minorities. We find examples of this in *The Sixth Sense* where Cole speaks Latin, “De profundis clamo ad te Domine,” while playing with toy soldiers, and when he explains that his school was built on a site where trials and speedy executions were held. In *Unbreakable*, we find an explicit yet underexploited idea that Dunn’s power and Elijah’s impotence are in conflict like the relations between white and black populations through history. In *Signs*, the first “incidents” occur in India (Bangalore), then in Mexico and Brazil; the invasion of *aliens* could be the revolt of foreign people. In *The Village*, we sense an allegory of American isolationism, with overtones of the Bush administration’s lies about weapons of mass destruction. This political agenda is clearly visible in *The Lady in the Water* in which the community comprises Mexicans, Koreans, and African Americans speaking English, Spanish, and Korean. To recompose the schema is then a matter of tuning and synchronizing the various idioms together. We find this more discretely in *The Happening* when the Moores take final refuge in a place that used to harbor slave hunters. Shyamalan is thus also a political analyst attentive to issues of minorities, a filmmaker of History as well as Stories. It may be yet another case of reflexivity, both disturbing and ironic, that this director, an American born in Pondicherry, has cast himself in every one of his films (the last one being the exception)—and in *Unbreakable* and *Signs*—in roles of dark-skinned culprits.

The reading and translation are also inscribed on another level: in the camera work. The spectacular arrival of Shyamalan on the movie scene in the years since 2000 was not solely based on his narrative artistry. There was certainly more. At a time when movies were about speed, Shyamalan reinvented slow pacing. At a time when editing created incoherent constructions of space, Shyamalan reinvented disciplined sequences of shots, hyperframing of images, a fluid visual direction that allows for minute details within a space—the room at the beginning of *Signs*, for example, or the mind-reading scene in *The Sixth Sense* in which Cole walks forward and backward on the wood floor. At a time when cinema was globalizing, he reinvented the domestic environment, limited to the inside of a house, a residence, or a village.

Shyamalan restored Euclidian coordinates to cinema, geometry. His camera *reads* space, in the classic Hollywood sense, most particularly in the Hitchcockian sense. Once again, this is not a metaphor. The camera meticulously scans across a room, finding its bearings with respect to other frames—doors, windows, trapdoors, cellar windows. The camera guides the spectator so that he or she will have an intimate knowledge of

David Dunn's basement, Heep's living room. It reads the space around it. And writes it as well. And its movements don't always follow the action. In *The Sixth Sense*, the camera veers left when Dr. Crowe's former patient (Donnie Wahlberg) is about to shoot him. In *The Village*, just as Lucius and Ivy are about to kiss, the camera elbows past the characters to frame a mysteriously empty rocking chair on the porch, and so on.

Shyamalan's camera is part and parcel of the enunciation of the film. It advances or retreats, rises or sinks, moves left or right: it is telling a story, articulating. Its movements sketch signs in spatial terms, messages: if only it could speak. Again, it doesn't merely underline the action but also traces its own lines, creating action but free to go against the grain. Frequently a camera move is constructed backward, creating a "rewind" effect: the camera pulls away from a face with an astonished look to find the source of its wonder, it moves back from the effect to the cause. Or it creates a strange dialogue, symmetry between the foreground and the background, the front and back of a given space. This technique is used in the opening scene of *Lady in the Water* and in a scene in *Signs* in which the space turns 180 degrees, going from the military man admiring Merrill playing sports to the boy's face snickering at him. It is in the extraordinary vertical plunge at the beginning of *The Village*, revealing a father who is sobbing, lying next to an empty grave where his son will soon be buried. All of these faces dangerously approach the lens—Graham at the beginning of *Signs*, Heep at the beginning of *The Lady in the Water*—as if they had something to say to the camera . . . and therefore to us. As if they are about to touch the mirror, or to pass through it.

To pass through the mirror, to transcend the limits of language. Do we not have the impression that during any given Shyamalan film the camera could pull another 180 and turn onto itself, onto its own spectacle, onto the film itself? Do we not have the impression during that plunging camera move at the beginning of *The Village* that in this dark hollow grave—this frame within a frame—is an image contemplating its own abyss? It is about bewilderment, about a mirror, about reading. It is about reflections, reflection, reflectivity. It is in the opening scene of *The Sixth Sense*, the only opening of his films that we haven't yet addressed—in which Crowe and his wife are reflected in the framed award that Malcolm has just received in recognition of his therapy work with children. Reflection is like reading, and reading like reflection—both in meaning and in spatial play. The camera that reads space reflects itself in it and recognizes itself, either in the case of frames within frames, of which there are many, or, on the contrary, in dislocating itself from the action, by respecting the boundaries of the space or in turning upon itself. Several times in *The*

Sixth Sense, the camera circles above the books Crowe is consulting while studying Cole's case. Text is always there to observe. The text of the scenario, the text of History, the text of the camera . . . the text of cinema.

Interpretation, reading, and translation are not random motifs in Shyamalan's filmmaking work; they define the relationship that the film has with itself, with its narrative, direction, even with its politics. They define the image that it ceaselessly hunts and turns away from, because the image is also the very image of itself—the image of its end (in both senses of the achievement of a goal and death, of resolution and cancellation). Interpretation, reading, and translation are the means by which Shyamalan's work knows itself and recognizes itself: speaks to itself. The Night Book is fraught with fissures, is infinitely fragile: it erases itself as soon as it appears, loses itself as soon as it finds itself, like a face in the sand at the water's edge.

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INTERMISSION

SHYAMALAN'S STORY

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CHAPTER 7

MAKING SENSE OF M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN SIGNS OF A POPULAR AUTEUR IN THE “FIELD OF HORROR”

MATT HILLS

MY FOCUS ON ONE WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/ACTOR OCCURS HERE BECAUSE THE work of M. Night Shyamalan, as I will demonstrate, can be taken to exemplify a specific type of intertextual position-taking within “the field of horror” (Gelder, *Horror* 1 and 6, “Vampire” 30). In order to explore the “space of possibles” (Bourdieu, *Field* 30) that texts interact with and come culturally to occupy, I will argue that different types of horror films are intended to take up positions within this “space of possibles,” as authors, via their texts, aim to link themselves to preceding traditions in the cultural history of horror, distinguishing themselves and their texts relationally from other generic productions. The “field of horror” is thus a cultural space in which texts and authors seek distinction from their rivals at the same time as seeking recognition within horror’s generic “field of cultural production” (see Bourdieu, *Field*). Rather than considering intertextuality as an attribute of allegedly “postmodern” horror, this chapter will instead address distinctions in cultural value that can be constructed through horror texts’ intertextual strategies, developing a Bourdieu-derived theoretical approach to the films of M. Night Shyamalan. In the following section, I will explore some theoretical preliminaries before analyzing Shyamalan’s films extratextually and intertextually. I will then conclude with a brief audience study related to Shyamalan’s film *Signs* (2004).

BOURDIEUIAN READINGS IN THE “FIELD OF HORROR”

Discussing the “field of horror” at the beginning of *The Horror Reader*, Ken Gelder concedes that he is using the notion of “field” “somewhat loosely” (1). The concept is, as he notes, taken from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose work on cultural distinctions has been frequently drawn upon in studies of material culture (see, for example, Hills, *Fan Cultures*; Jenkins). Bourdieu focuses on cultural production as well as consumption, arguing that artists, authors, and cultural producers take up (and generate) certain positions within their respective “fields,” where field designates “an area, a playing field, a field of objective relations among individuals or institutions competing for the same stakes” (*Field* 133).

Bourdieu’s emphasis on homologies between spaces of works and authors’ agentive position-takings in a field in *Homo Academicus* results in an interpretation of texts that sees them as interchangeable with authors’ field positions (xvii). Though the intentionalist fallacy is not regenerated here, it remains the case that, for Bourdieu, texts appear more or less directly to transpose authorial position-takings into the “aesthetic” realm.

Furthermore, the field of cultural production is divided into “autonomous” and “heteronomous” poles in Bourdieu’s work. Autonomous (artistic) production occurs within a “restricted field” of cultural production recognized by specialists in that “field,” whereas heteronomous (commercial) production is produced “in the field of large-scale cultural production” (Robbins 122), and is made for a large market of consumers who do not need to possess special competencies in order to understand such products. Here, popular art becomes seemingly oxymoronic; autonomous (consecrated/avant-garde) and heteronomous poles are kept apart through cultural practices. For Bourdieu, large-scale cultural production is either directly “commercial” (e.g., advertisements) or “popular” (that is, “committed to satisfying pre-established audiences” [Webb *et al.* 169]). The result is that “work done under the heteronomous principle of production is often coded as being not ‘real’ art. . . . This consecration belongs most obviously at the ‘autonomous’ pole of the field, the site of ‘art for art’s sake’” (Webb 160).

However, this division in Bourdieu’s theory of the field of the cultural production has been questioned. Paul Lopes argues that there is a need to “incorporate a restricted subfield of popular art into [Bourdieu’s] two-pole field of cultural production” (180). This gives us a way to think about horror’s intertextual relations, suggesting that we can view aspects of the field of horror film as existing *between* “restricted” and “large-scale” cultural production; horror films are made in part to satisfy preexisting audiences, but at the same time, some of these readers are not merely a

preexistent market; they are subculturally knowledgeable specialists: horror fans. And as Webb, Schirato, and Danaher note of restricted production, “The expected audience for work produced under this set of values is the *cognoscenti* . . . those who have acquired the specialized education that will allow them to understand the ‘in’-jokes, the intertextual references and the self-referentiality of the works. And the rewards in this part of the field are symbolic capital” (160–61), or prestige and reputation.

Horror cinema is thus not only commercial or “heteronomous,” but it also has its own “autonomous” subcultural pole of cultural production and consumption. If horror texts can be analyzed via their “intertextual relations,” then this appropriation of Bourdieuan reading gives rise to the possibility, in turn, that different types of intertextuality may position texts differently in the field of horror, calling on different types of audience knowledge and situating specific horror texts as “popular art.” Horror’s texts may be more or less imbued with intertextual cultural capital (official cultural and educational knowledge) and intertextual *subcultural* capital (“unofficial” knowledge that has currency within fan cultures), allowing officially educated and subculturally knowledgeable readers to exercise their discriminatory powers. Alternatively, horror texts may enact a break with proliferating intertextual relations, demanding to be read as hermetic and proprietorial (that is, “authored”) cultural productions, allowing readers with appropriate levels of cultural capital to respond as members of an *auteurist* interpretive community. What a Bourdieuan intertextual reading can uncover are the bids for cultural and symbolic capital that are structured into horror films.

In the next section I will consider one type of “intertextual relation” that horror texts can display in order to bid for cultural value—a type of intertextuality based on the *refusal* of connections to other pop cultural, generic texts. Bids for horror’s cultural value can be as much concerned with what is *not* referenced as with what is.

MORE “NEW SINCERITY”: HORROR BY NIGHT

The films of M. Night Shyamalan adopt a series of intertextual position-taking strategies; primarily, these films are intertextually positioned as *auteurist*. Jim Collins’s essay, “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity,” can help develop this assertion. Collins identifies two distinct textual responses to “the perpetual circulation and recirculation of signs that forms the fabric of postmodern cultural life” (246). The first involves a kind of rampant intertextuality, “in which John Ford meets Jules Verne and H. G. Wells” (243) in “profoundly intertextual” diegetic worlds (249). Collins terms this type of filmic strategy “eclectic

irony” (242). By contrast, the second intertextual strategy that Collins identifies is that of “new sincerity”: “Another type of genre film . . . is also a response to the same media-sophisticated landscape. Rather than trying to master the array [of recirculating signs] through ironic manipulation, these films attempt to reject it altogether, purposely evading the media-saturated terrain of the present in pursuit of an almost forgotten authenticity” (257). Collins offers a series of “distinguishing features” of the new sincerity text such as “foregrounding not only . . . the intertextual, but . . . the Ur-textual, in which an originary genre text takes on a quasi-sacred function as the guarantee of authenticity; the fetishising of ‘belief’ rather than irony as the only way to resolve conflict” (259).

I will consider how this distinctive type of intertextual position-taking is utilized in the genre films of M. Night Shyamalan, which Collins would presumably view as responding to a “postmodern” array of signs via their emphasis on belief rather than irony. Shyamalan’s films play as “smart” cinema, but *without* adopting a tone of irony, black humor, fatalism, or nihilism. This is most evident in *Signs*; but an antinihilistic, anti-ironic, and “sincere” sensibility is also crucial to the narratives of *Unbreakable* (2000) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999), which hinge on the belief systems of characters David Dunn and Malcolm Crowe respectively (both played by Bruce Willis). Shyamalan’s films also display a repeated lack of rampant intertextuality, despite not being set in a mythic past and thus not entirely evading contexts of media saturation (in fact, mediation plays crucial roles in the post-September eleventh *Signs* and also in the appropriated superhero fantasy of *Unbreakable*). And Shyamalan’s films tend to prioritize a limited range of generic Ur-texts—*War of the Worlds* (1953), *The Birds* (1963), and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)—in *Signs*; superhero narratives in *Unbreakable*; and “subtle” horror in *The Sixth Sense*.

I will thus explore how Shyamalan’s “new sincerity” films bid for a specific form of “authored” cultural value. By minimizing intertextuality, other than in relation to Ur-texts, and by disavowing “eclectic irony,” Shyamalan sets out to avoid displaying the “secondhand quality” of “self-reflexive” horror films such as *Scream* (1996, see Schneider). To address how Shyamalan’s films are positioned as “original” and “authored” rather than recycled, I will take a brief detour through extratextual (promotional/academic) signs circulating around Shyamalan’s work.

We might expect the “authorial” status of Shyamalan’s films to be, in part, the product of extratextual factors such as promotional interviews with the director in niche magazines like *SFX* (see Hunt). And this type of extratextual positioning of the “text itself” is certainly very much in evidence, with Shyamalan performatively constructing a highly specific position for

himself and his films: "I want to make a movie . . . with two sides: to compete with the most artistic movie, but also entertaining at the level of the ride that's as strong as any ride out there. That's why August was and is the perfect month for me to release movies, because it's that hybrid month. I can play that summer movie thing out and then it turns into a fall movie if it has that ability. Those assets can come out as well" (quoted in Gross 39). This auto-positioning accords with Timothy Corrigan's observation that interviews can operate as one form of "the contemporary auteur's construction and promotion of a self . . . [being] one of the few, documentable extratextual spaces where the auteur, in addressing cults of fans and critical viewers, can engage and disperse his . . . own organising agency as auteur" (107–8). Rather than interviews reflecting the "truth" of an authorial intention or "organizing presence," then, they constitute a key cultural site for the performativity of authorial agency (see Staiger 51).

By discussing his films as "August" movies, Shyamalan bids for a central position within the field of horror, seeking to position his work extratextually as blockbuster "ride" and as art-house-style "art," and thus as a point of mediation between "restricted" and "large-scale" or autonomous/heteronomous horror. An awareness of "that hybrid month" marks Shyamalan as industry-savvy (he is explicitly discussing an industrial and relational system of value) and as apparently content with his naturalized place within that system of value. August is, as he says, "perfect . . . for *me* to release movies" (my italics), thereby dematerializing industry forces in the very moment that he has invoked such a system and recontextualizing release strategy as a personal, authorial choice.

The nomination of a generic and authorial self is, in Shyamalan's case, even written into his directorial self-identity since we are told in an example of *SFX* magazine's "expertise in the area of information" (Hunt 195) that Shyamalan's "name is actually Manoj Nellyattu Shyamalan . . . born on 6 August 1970 in India" (Gross 39). "Night"—the part of Shyamalan's identity taken as his first name in much promotional material such as DVD special features—is thus an Anglicization, but it is also a generic trope, connoting the archetypal darkness and mystery of the horror film, as well as potentially condensing this genericity onto a stereotyped notion of the Indian continent. Shyamalan's August birthday also appears to link uncannily into the "natural" sense that his films should be released as "August" movies. In terms of birth date and (performatively) adopted name, Shyamalan hence appears to be "naturally" identified with signs of horror and mystery.

In the same *SFX* interview, Shyamalan is linked with a further reputation-building intertext, the figure of "Hitchcock": "If modern filmmaking

is looking for someone to assume the suspense mantle from the late Alfred Hitchcock, Hollywood may have found that person in director/writer M. Night Shyamalan. . . . Like the Master, Shyamalan enjoys using the tools at his disposal to keep the audience on edge. . . . He claims that, unlike Hitchcock, he's not a big fan of twist endings, although one wouldn't suspect this given the fact that both *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* had them" (Gross 39). Alongside the designation of Shyamalan as a "true auteur of the genre," capable of creating "characters [that] are at once likeable and *believable*— . . . a rarity in recent genre efforts" (Jackson 48), it is Hitchcock's name (along with those of Spielberg and Romero) that either recurs in publicity material or is taken for granted as an unnecessary reference: "[In *Signs*] Shyamalan . . . incorporates the influences of *The Birds* and George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*. Typical of the way Shyamalan borrows but adapts is his reuse of Romero's device of the news-dispensing TV set, which is often turned off here on the principle that people don't want to know how bad things really are in the world" (Newman 52).

Both Gross and Newman approach Shyamalan-as-auteur; he is nominated as an author by virtue of being linked to canonical "greats" such as Hitchcock, thus sharing in a form of symbolic capital. But Shyamalan is simultaneously, and rather anxiously, dissociated from cited auteurs, being unlike Hitchcock (Gross) or being shown to borrow but also adapt from Romero (Newman). An excessively close validation of one auteur by reference to another clearly has to be avoided. Any overproximity would threaten the artistic distinctiveness/distinction of the newcomer consecrated by virtue of reperforming "Hitchcockian" themes, narratives, or styles. Shyamalan is also repeatedly linked to art-house *and* commercial auteurs, replaying his own bid for a center point in the field between restricted and large-scale cultural production and thus for the hybridized position of "popular art." For example, Philip Strick links *The Sixth Sense*'s direction to that of Spielberg and Tarkovsky, suggesting that Shyamalan and the film are "studiously versed in art-house classics as much as in Spielberg" (258).

These "auteurist" readings have been partly consecrated by academic extratextual commentary, given the way in which the languages and position-takings of auteurism are able to move between academic interpretive communities, publicity/promotional cultures, and fan cultures (see Klinger; Austin 126–27). Comments made by Reynold Humphries in the conclusion to *The American Horror Film: An Introduction* perform this type of extratextual canonization: "With the exception of Shyamalan, no major talent has emerged in the last decade. . . . Only with Shyamalan can it be said that something exciting has arrived in Hollywood" (189, 195). Humphries

particularly appreciates and validates Shyamalan's second major release, *Unbreakable*, described by Kim Newman within his *Sight and Sound* review of *Signs* as "the artiest superhero movie ever made" (52). It is also *Unbreakable* that fascinates critic Geoff Klock, who reads it partly as "about interpellation . . . of ordinary people into an intentional subtext formed by superhero comic books" (179). Where *The Sixth Sense* has been psychoanalyzed or cited within Marxian discussion of subjectivity (see for example, Žižek xxxiii, La Caze, and Wayne 267), *Unbreakable* has been read as a tale of Althusserian misrecognition (Klock 179) and as a symbolic meditation on the ideological/psychical desire for individual uniqueness (Humphries 193–94). Shyamalan's work therefore appears to be in the emergent process of achieving legitimation within the academic field. Unlike for example *Scream*, Shyamalan's post-*Wide Awake* (1998) genre films do not bid for a populist, heteronomous versioning of subcultural capital, thereby alienating academics who refute such a concentration on popular cultural capital, or alienating "restricted/autonomous" fans who wish to preserve the distinctiveness of their fan cultural capital. Instead, Shyamalan's texts (and supporting, activating extratexts) play out a balancing act between "autonomous" and "heteronomous" positions in the field of horror.

It could reasonably be objected that I have not thus far carried out an intertextual Bourdieuan reading of Shyamalan's films as primary texts. With this in mind, what intertexts in *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, and *Signs* distinctively license these films as authorial creations? I would argue that the extratexts circulating around Shyamalan's work cannot and do not operate in a (primary textual) vacuum. *Contra* arguments that "the text itself" has no existence beyond its intertextually organized readings, I would suggest that a dialectical exchange between extratextual and textual structures operates in relation to performative bids for cultural value. Texts must be able plausibly to sustain the readings projected onto them if those readings are to "hold." Thus, forms of intertextual capital (fan cultural/cultural) must be relationally structured into primary horror texts, even if readings carried out by fans/academics with their own forms of capital (fan readings premised usually on exercising fan cultural capital or academic readings premised usually upon exercising the cultural capital of "Theory") can then extratextually focus upon or refute types of intertextual capital at play.

Returning us to the text, Dudley Andrew's discussion of the *auteur*-as-sign suggests shifting away from the analysis of extratextual "signs" and moving toward an apprehension of textual "signatures": "Always a problematic and very special sign, the signature of the author is a mark on the surface of the text signaling its source. The signature embeds within it . . . the temporal process that brought the text into being in the first place. The

signature moors the film image to a submerged reef of values by means of the slender line drawn by camera or pen. It is visible in the credits of films, in the literal appearance in their midst of their films of auteurs like Hitchcock, and after him of Truffaut, Godard, and Rohmer" (83).

For Andrew, the author's "signature" is somehow visible and self-evident in film credits, whereas in actual fact film credits are mediated through industrial processes of negotiation such as the approval of the Writers and Artists Guild. Film credits are thus, unlike the cultural significance conventionally attributed to signatures, no guarantor that "the author" was somehow actually there, or actually responsible, as author. It is no doubt precisely because of the insecurities in his argument that Andrew raises another version of the auteur's "signature": "the literal appearance in the midst of their films" (83). Here is a special (Peircean) iconic and indexical sign of the auteur; his person, his body, is captured within the text as a mark signaling its source.

And yet this is a relatively unusual procedure in film; auteurs do not frequently populate their own films. The "special" sign of authorship that Andrew is keen to reinstate as a mark of textual belonging (rather than extratextual attribution) is itself a specific performance of authorship: the auteur seeks to cement his own place in relation to what Michel Foucault has termed the "author function," that is, the set of cultural discourses that position some texts as authored and others as nonauthored, as well as allowing texts to be classified and valued via their authorial attributions. In Foucault's argument, the "author-function" works independently of flesh-and-blood authors, whose intentions and actions are decentered by a cultural, discursive system, and thus by "the 'author' as a function of discourse" (19). However, this neglects the possibility that flesh-and-blood authors will seek to interact with, and make use of, any such discursive system. The "author-function" ignores what Joe Moran has termed, "the relationship between the 'real' author and . . . image" (67).

By not addressing the auteurist cameo, work on film authorship has missed one strategy through which the "author-function" can be performatively cited and through which the auteur can begin to take on a celebrity or "star" image. Moving beyond the inadequately indexical "credit," the cameo inserts the auteur's body into the circuit of mediation far more intensely than extratextual interviews. For here, the mediated authorial body and the authorial text are semiotically unified.

We can, of course, align M. Night Shyamalan with Andrew's argument. By adopting a self-promotional visibility within "his" texts, Shyamalan intertextually cites Hitchcock's cameos within canonical film-as-popular-art while also bidding for his own symbolic capital not only as a celebrated

auteur but also as a celebrity auteur. This intertextual position-taking renders Shyamalan's authorship a textual self-performance as well as an extratextual bid for cultural value.

In *The Sixth Sense* (where he plays Dr. Hill) and *Unbreakable* (where he is a stadium drug dealer), Shyamalan's on-screen appearances are fleeting and mainly notable to and for "restricted"/"autonomous" film *cognoscenti*. These are cameos in the Hitchcockian mold, working as intertextual bids for the value of *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable* as popular film art. The pleasures of spotting these "in-jokes" lie in a form of self-recognition and cultural reproduction: auteurist interpretive communities relatively high in cultural capital can exercise this capital in their readings, while specialist horror fans can also spot Shyamalan as a marker of their fan cultural capital. However, in *Signs*, Shyamalan performs a significant speaking role, that of the veterinarian Ray Reddy, thus altering his intertextual position-taking, and moving closer to the "heteronomous" pole of film reception (something that *Lady in the Water* [2006] builds upon further). Since Shyamalan has a more significant acting role, his "presence" becomes textually obvious rather than a wink to "restricted"/knowing audiences. No longer semiotically meaningful merely as a Hitchcockian intertextuality, Shyamalan's performance shifts toward metatextuality, becoming an authorial, enunciative *mise-en-abyme* in which a character substitutes for a text's author.

In *Signs*, aspects of Ray Reddy/Shyamalan's dialogue are ambiguously double-voiced; some of this dialogue functions referentially/realistically within the diegesis as well as providing a commentary on the film's status as a produced artifact (*Lady in the Water* extends this double-voicing by casting Shyamalan, seemingly nonironically, as a visionary creative). At one point, Reddy says apologetically to Mel Gibson's character, Graham Hess, "It had to be at that right moment . . . It was like it was meant to be . . . I know what I've done to you. I've made you question your faith . . . I'm truly sorry for what I've done to you and yours."

This dialogue centers on the diegetic fact that Ray Reddy caused the death of Hess's wife, but as it is voiced by *Sign's* writer/producer/director, it can also be "heard" as an authorial speech act. Like Reddy, Shyamalan has also made Hess question his faith—there is a momentary conflation of character/auteur agency here. Similarly, Reddy's role in the narrative's "signs" of Godlike pandeterminism partly recapitulates Shyamalan's role as the guiding force behind the constructedness of signifying events. Shyamalan's appearance as Reddy articulates the auteur's production of the text—making things happen to Hess—with diegetic implications that a pandeterminist force ("God"/the divine) is at work, once again working on Hess ("like it was meant to be"). The extratextual blurring of

Reddy/Shyamalan has prompted a number of reviewers to interpret *Signs* as “M. Night Shyamalan saying the auteur is, literally, God” (Cornell 118), or to allege “that some astonishingly lazy plotting can be written off as evidence of the divine” (Newman 52).

The crucial narrative role allocated to Reddy/Shyamalan as “a character who has to sell us a difficult plot point” (Cornell 118) also works textually as a bid for the “heteronomous” mainstreaming of Shyamalan’s auteurist agency/celebrity: What would usually be conceptualized as extratextual performances of authorship are hence taken back into the text as part of an assertion of authorial value. The blurring of Reddy/Shyamalan binds the position-taking of text and author closely together, meaning that the “almost perfect homology” between textual and authorial field-positioning that Pierre Bourdieu posits is produced here.

As Sharon Willis has observed of Quentin Tarantino’s actor/auteur duality, with *Signs* Shyamalan too “provides a phantom presence within the film and an extratextual commercial performance—which is probably why he has emerged so spectacularly as the auteur of the 1990s” (284). Both Shyamalan and Tarantino have sought to use cameos and acting roles to bolster their claims to auteurism in a kind of auto-auteurist self-production. The author is far from “dead” or even resurrected here, appearing instead as part of a specific intertextual position-taking and bid for subcultural capital that seeks to combine “restricted” fan/art-house recognition with “large-scale” commercial recognition (Pribram 168). However, the specific intertextual position-taking of Shyamalan’s films centers on models of authorship rather than upon the rampant intertextualities of Tarantino’s *auteur-fan* films.

Shyamalan’s cameos invoke Hitchcock and, where this intertextuality is displaced in *Signs*, Hitchcock returns intertextually via similarities to *The Birds* (1963) as well as via Shyamalan’s use of sound (see Gross 39, Newman 52). By disavowing rampant intertextuality, Shyamalan’s films again represent Jim Collins’s “new sincerity.” But I have suggested here that this type of response to a “postmodern” circulation of signs needs to be interpreted as a position-taking that turns away from (dispersed) intertextuality in favor of specific intertextualities that can sustain the textual construction of authorial distinction.

Shyamalan’s brand of “new sincerity” is marked by a persistent duality across his intertextual and extratextual performances of authorship. His films display the subcultural capital of the cameo-auteur and the cultural capital of the actor-auteur, as well as intertextual references split between Hitchcock/Spielberg and Tarkovsky/Craven. And Shyamalan’s “August” movies are extratextually positioned as art/rides. Shyamalan’s texts (interviews *and* primary texts) thus consistently struggle

to maintain a contradictory but highly profitable position in the field of horror that mediates between “autonomous” and “heteronomous” poles by adopting the role of popular film art. The profitability of this central position-taking is that it can accrue maximum amounts of both cultural capital and economic capital, as well as the symbolic capital/recognition accorded to consecrated texts—and their authors—that nevertheless reach mass audiences.

There are risks inherent in such a position-taking. Seeking to integrate autonomous/heteronomous poles of the field of horror, Shyamalan’s authorial and promotional “technique of self” (Staiger 49) threatens to fragment into these very components within audience readings. In the next section, I will analyze postings to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) message board for *Signs*, considering the very different, conflictual interpretations the film has provoked by virtue of its position-taking as popular art in the field of horror. A Bourdieuan framework can systematically account for the polarization of audience views surrounding this particular film.

FIELD DIS-INTEGRATION ON IMDB.COM

The Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com) provides an intriguing resource for academic study, but it is also suited to my aim here. My focus is not specifically on Shyamalan’s online fans. Rather, I am interested in IMDb.com precisely because it is not wholly fan-centric and instead offers a more diffuse forum for film discussion that encompasses fan responses and those of more “generalized” moviegoers. If the field of horror is made up of autonomous/heteronomous poles, then fan sites will tend to provide relatively easy access to “autonomous” or restricted/subcultural/cult/underground horror fans’ readings. By contrast, getting access *only* to a “general” or heteronomous audience may be considerably problematic (David Gauntlett has to concede that even IMDb cannot entirely offer this [85]). What IMDb usefully offers, however, is the possibility to analyze a range of audience responses to any given film *across* “autonomous/fan” and “heteronomous/general” positions.

Indeed, the *Signs* IMDb message board was, as Bourdieuan theory would predict, characterized by extreme interpretative disagreements. I downloaded all postings available on October 30, 2002, and analyzed these. Postings had been made between August 6 and October 28, and the message board carried approximately 120 entries (a handful had been deleted by moderators). Some of the *Signs* postings exhibit the same level of scholarly, knowledgeable, and theoretical discussion that Will Brooker found in his study (204), with GunZblaZin posting “Critical analysis

of 'SIGNS' by credible sources . . ." (Oct. 28) and "The 'alien threat' is a metaphor for demons and fear" (Oct. 28), as if in corrective rebuke to other posters. The latter posting includes the text of an Associated Press story quoting David J. Skal: "[Horror movies] can be read as metaphors for cultural or metaphysical issues not often addressed elsewhere in secular society" and is headed "Cerebral Fright Films Gain Ground." A detailed analysis of the film by wkbeason, "Shyamalan's Greatest Work To Date" (Sept. 1), reads it as Hitchcockian and argues that it "is the context that is important whenever reading a sign and Signs is a collection of signs." A number of lengthy threads display impatience with posters who have criticized the film, such as "What is wrong with most of you?" by colubrid_lady (Aug. 26) and "To everyone that hates this movie . . ." (deadweight714, Oct. 18), which concludes by asking, "If you hated this movie, what movies do you like?" The film's many "naysayers" (jack_nuttin, Aug. 6) lead off with "Signs The worst film about aliens . . ." (PaNtheris, Oct. 28), and detail how much money they wasted on seeing the film: "Yeah, the con artist Shamster pickpocketed me too. \$7.50 to be exact" (comiis8, Oct. 29). Other strong "anti-" sentiments are unambiguously introduced in "A Crappy Movie" (Tokugawa, Sept. 3) and "Shamalamadingdong should kill himself" (crzydavy, Aug. 8), which lists nine reasons for detesting the film.

Unlike the seemingly shared, cultist reading strategy of *Strange Days* (1995) posters (Brooker 216), *Signs* posters display a marked "love/hate divide" (Gauntlett 87), albeit one that maps very closely onto whether the film is treated as an "autonomous" film with art-house cachet or a "heteronomous" genre movie. Hence, unlike Gauntlett's IMDb posters who were happy to assert their nonintellectual enjoyment of *Starship Troopers* (1997) as "guns, nukes and flying body parts" *contra* getting "all academic about this flick" (87), *Signs* posters who reject "artsy-fartsy" readings of the film tend to reject it *tout court* rather than discursively claiming non-academic or nonart pleasures: "Many of us are sick of M. Night's pretentious ALLEGED symbolism, subtle meanings, metaphors and other obscure artsy fartsy stuff he whipped up INSTEAD of a good screenplay. The torture you undergo above [this is in reply to an interpretation of *Signs*] in trying to make some sense out of this turkey proves our point" ("Re: What Signs is really about," Tom-379, Sept. 16).

By contrast, posters who defend *Signs* typically do so by treating it as a film to be read metaphorically (that is, they mobilize cultural capital in order to position the film as popular art): "It's okay to use your brain while watching a movie" ("Bravo," jack_nuttin, Aug. 6); "Can you not look a

little deeper into the movie? It was not meant to be just another alien movie" ("What is wrong with most of you?" colubrid_lady, Aug. 26).

This leads to accusations that posters who cannot appreciate such a film are "moronic": "There is one main point to remember in seeing this movie: ITS NOT ABOUT ALIENS. . . . Many of you have posted saying that the ending makes no sense. If you are too blatantly moronic to not understand the perfectly well thought out, well explained finale of the film, then I don't think that you should be let out of your house to begin with. If anyone wants me to explain the ending . . . then please, post a reply . . ." ("To everyone that hates this movie," deadweight714, Oct. 18).

The pleasures discursively called up across this debate are not often pleasures taken in response to the film as a horror/thriller text (few posters discuss being scared, for example). Rather, these are pleasures of cultural self-legitimation—pleasures of defending one's cultural space and position within the field. "Heteronomous" naysayers position themselves as devotees of common sense puncturing the pretensions and posturings of Shyamalan's film, while "autonomous" supporters position themselves as the kind of audience who can appreciate "narrative development and depth of character . . . [as] a refreshing moment in a summer filled with mediocrity" ("Shyamalan's Greatest Work To Date," wkbeason, Sept. 1). For this latter fraction of posters, it is indeed the case that they have "found much *pleasure* in the film, and . . . this was closely connected to a feeling that the film had serious intentions" (Gauntlett 87).

The majority of "autonomous" posters refer respectfully to M. Night Shyamalan via his surname, while cinnamon_x86 refers to the writer/director as "Manoj" ("Why does everybody ONLY look at the STORY?" Oct. 29). By contrast, "heteronomous" posters occasionally appropriate Shyamalan's authorial proper name, mocking his bid for symbolic capital by twisting the auteur's identity into "the . . . Shamster" (comiis8, Oct. 29) or "Shamalamadingdong" (crzydavy, Aug. 8).

Pleasures of self-legitimation and self-recognition predominate, with intertextual references structured into *Signs* being recognized by the *cognoscenti* among "autonomous" posters: "Merrill's reference to events being "like War of the Worlds" plays nicely into the TV's description of ground forces assembling and people flocking to churches and synagogues. Here, Shyamalan pays tribute to that classic sci-fi flick . . . Many contend that the boarding up of the house is a rip off of previous films . . . The criticism fails to see that the film seeks to pay homage to the genre (particularly to Alfred Hitchcock)" (wkbeason, Sept. 1).

However, the film's Ur-textual, "new sincerity" intertextualities, as well as Shyamalan's acting appearance, are not positioned as acts of homage or

distinction by “anti-” posters. Instead, these are construed as Shyamalan’s “forcing” of an ending (“The director forced an ending, did you notice that?” breen-1, Sept. 24) and his “forcing” a way into *Signs*: “When I die, you will never hear me say in my final seconds ‘It was meant to be’. She [Hess’s wife] should have said ‘What is an Indian guy doing in farm country?’ and then Mel could reply ‘He’s the self-absorbed director forcing his way into the film’. That scene works better for me” (crzydavy, Aug. 8). Both these rejections of Shyamalan’s bids for symbolic capital (but particularly crzydavy’s) work by alleging that Shyamalan is trying too hard; the auteur’s feel for the game of field distinction thus appears to be slightly out of kilter, as he extratextually “forces” an ending and textually “forces” the *mise-en-abyme* of Reddy/Shyamalan. Like the extratextual poaching inherent in renaming Shyamalan as “the Shamster,” these interpretive strategies revolve around disputing the legitimacy of the author’s films as popular art while also alleging that, due to Shyamalan’s very pretensions, *Signs* simultaneously fails to work as a genre movie: “Why would aliens, who are carbon based . . . be hurt by water? . . . why would aliens that can be killed by water go to a planet that is 3/4 water? . . . riddle me this Batman. If you can fly across the galaxy, if your technology is so advanced that you can make your ships invisible then why can’t you put on a frigging wetsuit or some other protective coating?” (crzydavy, Aug. 8).

Rather than working on two levels, as some of the film’s fans argue (wkbeason, Sept. 1), and as Shyamalan himself suggests in interview (Gross, 39), here it is argued that the film’s “pretentious” level degrades what is apprehended as its “real”/base level; the alien invasion plot is allegedly badly done because it is not treated properly as the film’s central narrative focus and not handled convincingly. For crzydavy, the film *is* a genre piece about aliens, but in a highly dissatisfying manner, whereas for its defenders, “ITS NOT ABOUT ALIENS” (deadweight714, Oct. 18). In a sense, these IMDb posters are not disagreeing over the same film; for one interpretative community, *Signs* is constructed and treated as commercial film art, while for the other, it’s a genre movie, stupid. The former group recognizes and replays Shyamalan’s bid, via his texts, for a central position in the field of horror. They respond as if this is a legitimate position-taking, recognizing the director’s field-based symbolic capital and treating *Signs* accordingly. The latter opposed group refuses or rejects Shyamalan’s signs of field-based distinction and recontextualizes *Signs* as a failed “summer” movie rather than as the perfect “August” film. This indicates that intertextual position-takings in the field of horror need not be wholly successful; bids for forms of intertextual capital can be refuted or go unrecognized by specific audiences. However, this

process of audience recognition/refusal is itself part of a broader process of cultural reproduction in which audiences pleurably stake out their own space in the field of cultural consumption by responding to intertextual position-takings and by working to valorize their own preexistent levels of cultural capital/subcultural capital.

In this piece I have argued that Bourdieu's work on cultural fields of production can be used to inform the textual analysis of horror films as well as secondary or publicity para-texts. By considering the types of intertextuality that forms of popular culture deploy then generic "fields" can be addressed, such as the "field of horror" and its Bourdieuan "space of possibles." My focus has been on the hybridization of Bourdieu's "autonomous" and "heteronomous" poles of cultural production via a case study of M. Night Shyamalan and his construction as a "popular auteur." My focus on the mediated figure and films of Shyamalan has sought to identify the cultural processes through which a specific type of contemporary "field-position-taking" auteurism can be simultaneously harnessed to signs of "art" and "commerce" and coded through "autonomous" intertextualities and "heteronomous" celebrity status. This brand of auteur suggests that academic work on the Foucauldian "author function" has been overly discursive, failing to focus on this function as something that can be appropriated in the pursuit of distinction by flesh-and-blood cultural producers.

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RESHAPING THE DIRECTOR AS STAR

INVESTIGATING M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN'S IMAGE

KIM OWCZARSKI

IN THE WEEK BEFORE HIS FIFTH FEATURE FILM WAS released, a picture of director, producer, and screenwriter M. Night Shyamalan filled the cover of the August 5, 2002 edition of *Newsweek*. Next to the image, the magazine claimed Shyamalan to be “The Next Spielberg” and suggested he was “Hollywood’s Hottest New Storyteller.” Editor-in-chief Mark Whitaker discussed the unusual choice of Shyamalan for the cover in his weekly column, suggesting that the potential of the young director earned him both this comparison to Spielberg and the extensive press coverage he received by the magazine. In defending the choice of Shyamalan on the cover, Whitaker claimed:

We don’t do “Hollywood covers” very often, and we don’t always get them right. In retrospect, we’ve done some that were pretty silly. (“Can a Movie Help Make a President?” was our line for the 1983 astronaut epic, *The Right Stuff*. Within months the candidate in question, John Glenn, withdrew from the race.) We’ve also lived to regret putting a movie our reviewers didn’t like on the cover because we thought it would have big box-office—and newsstand—sales. (Remember *Pearl Harbor* [2001]? Disappointing on both counts.) But we’ve done many show-business covers we’re proud of, and they usually have one of two things going for them. They tap into meaty social, political or historical debates (*JFK* [1991], *Saving Private Ryan* [1998], *Malcolm X* [1992]). Or they introduce our readers to an actor or director who is particularly promising—well ahead of the media pack. (4)

Unlike most of the show business covers Whitaker describes, which center more on films that were some form of expected cultural phenomena, this particular cover prominently featured the image of the director—not images from the film itself or the actors. It foregrounded Shyamalan as a “star” director, one deserving of such public attention.

Certainly Shyamalan was not the first director to emerge as a star or to receive such treatment. Alfred Hitchcock successfully transmitted his image across multiple media fifty years ago. Francis Ford Coppola’s exploits in his early filmmaking career were legendary to the public throughout much of the 1970s, including through a satirical sketch of his runaway production, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), on *Saturday Night Live* in 1979. But what is particularly interesting about Shyamalan being positioned as a star director in 2002 is how he uniquely captured the tension operating between two poles in American filmmaking at the time. On the one hand, his mainstream success underscored the primacy of the studio system, with its heavy marketing machinery and reliance on box office receipts. On the other hand, his original screenplays based on character-driven drama put his filmmaking more in line with those working outside the system—or, within those studios considered more “independent” or independent friendly, such as Miramax—and who were deemed art-house directors.¹

Shyamalan’s early image negotiated these conflicting tendencies of seeing the star as artist and the star as laborer. Most star studies have focused on the images of film actors and actresses as the site of this conflict, and have stopped short of investigating other kinds of film stars. In the first part of this essay, I will consider how star studies can help explore the different aspects of the director’s role in the production process in terms of this conflict. Next, I will examine the discourse surrounding Shyamalan as a star director in the popular and Hollywood press during his early career and discuss how Shyamalan uniquely managed the divide. Finally, I will look specifically at the marketing of his films and how, through them, Shyamalan’s image consolidated the two divisions. I argue that the image of the director as star is a contradiction between competing discourses of what constitutes artistic filmmaking and what constitutes mainstream filmmaking. M. Night Shyamalan’s image as a star director not only defined him as part of the mainstream Hollywood machinery but also defined him as working *against* it. The ability of Shyamalan’s image to mediate these conflicts ultimately defines the limited terms available for director stardom within the contemporary filmmaking landscape.

**FROM THE IDEOLOGICAL TO THE ECONOMIC:
RESHAPING STAR STUDIES TO STAR DIRECTORS**

Although there have been a substantial number of star studies, most have focused on actors and actresses, including those studies that do not look so much at particular stars, but star culture as a whole. These studies have left out a number of individuals whose stardom within and outside of the Hollywood studio system does not revolve around acting. In many ways, the star discourse surrounding acting does not fit other types of roles within the film production process. Yet, some of the theoretical star studies can be applied to director stardom, even if they take some adaptation to fit directors' distinctive roles within the system. In this section, I will look at two texts that take vastly different approaches to the star system but provide some starting off points for looking at the star director. First, I use Richard Dyer's groundbreaking study *Stars* to discuss the ideological role that a star's image plays within our culture. Second, I use Paul McDonald's *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities* to examine the role of the studio system in star construction. Finally, I will close this section with some of the aspects of director stardom that these star studies address but need to be reformulated. In order to understand how a director such as M. Night Shyamalan emerged as a star, it is necessary to account for not only the ideological role he plays within and outside of the system but also the economic one.

Dyer defines ideology as "the set of ideas and representations in which people collectively make sense of the world and the society in which they live" (2). He argues that the extratextual as well as the textual images (the films themselves) of a particular star work together within an ideological framework that separates the authentic from the constructed. Indeed, it is the interplay between these particular images that sets up a "real" star image as opposed to the character the actor or actress adopts for a role, which is seen as "fiction": "Because stars have an existence in the world independent of their screen/'fiction' appearances, it is possible to believe . . . that as people they are more real than characters in stories. This means that they serve to disguise the fact that they are just as much produced images, constructed personalities as 'characters' are" (22). The extratextual discourse, then, substantiates the star as a "real" person, rather than demonstrating how the star image is itself also a construction. Dyer argues that the degree of success related to the production of star identity and the consumption of it as authentic is highly dependent upon how well the star masks ideological conflicts.

The issue of authenticity is not the only ideological conflict the image of a star tries to smooth over. While other theorists suggest that stars

function to preserve the status quo, Dyer suggests that “the star’s image [is] related to contradictions in ideology—whether within the dominant ideology, or between it and other subordinated/revolutionary ideologies” (28–30). He uses the example of women’s sexuality in 1950s Hollywood films to discuss the conflict between trying to depict women as both sexual (which threatens the patriarchal order) and pure (which reinforces the status quo) through the character of Cora and the image of Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946). Turner’s public image as a “combination of sexuality and ordinariness” (helped in part by her own “discovery” myth and the scandals that surrounded her) unifies the otherwise “inconsistent” character motivation of Cora as both a femme fatale and a childlike woman in need of protection (30). Dyer suggests that star images like Lana Turner’s “function crucially in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to ‘manage’ or resolve. In exceptional cases, it has been argued that certain stars, far from managing contradictions, either expose them or embody an alternative or oppositional ideological position (itself usually contradictory) to dominant ideology” (38). In this regard, star images must be understood in relation to ideological conflicts that take place within the culture at the time—managing them, exposing them, and challenging them. Dyer uses Turner’s image, and particularly her role as Cora, as an example of a star image specifically exposing cultural conflicts over women’s sexuality.

While Dyer suggests that there may be a close correspondence between the star’s image and the characters he or she portrays, he cautions against a simple conflation of star-as-textual identity with star-as-person. Indeed, he argues that the creation of the star’s image is not only through the star himself or herself but also through a variety of other functioning variables—for example, the star’s relationship with a director, the studio, writers, and the costume department. It is one of the few direct links he makes between star identity and the studio system—the issue McDonald takes up in his book *The Star System*. McDonald suggests that “using the word ‘system’ immediately invokes ideas of stardom as involving an organised interrelationship of elements or features. To study the star system is to look for the standard mechanisms used by the film industry to construct and promote the images of leading performers” (1). Unlike Dyer’s ideological-centered model of star image making, McDonald argues that star identity must be seen as a product not of the culture as a whole but of the economic forces driving the film industry.

The economic relationship between the film industry and star image explored in McDonald’s book is in part based on Richard deCordova’s work on the early film studio system that developed around the turn of

the twentieth century. In *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America*, deCordova suggests that a discourse on acting in the popular press “began to put in place a system of product differentiation that would be based on the identity of the subject within an institutionalized system of enunciation” (46). He argues that “Films with actors could be differentiated from films without actors, and, as the presence of actors became accepted as the norm, particular actors (their identities) could be differentiated from other actors” (46). McDonald, in part, bases his work on deCordova’s assertions of the creation of star identity as product differentiation, but spends the majority of his book talking about the classical studio system and its successors. Building on this last point of deCordova’s, McDonald argues that “the star system deals in individualism. In Hollywood, stars are represented to moviegoers as distinctively different people and stardom requires moviegoers to be able to differentiate one performer from another” (1). This product differentiation is important because it acts as a potential stabilizer in an unpredictable market (12). Indeed, in the current system of film production, each film is marketed independently, relying more on the star image as potentially bringing in a large audience (83).

As an individual becomes more “bankable,” McDonald argues that he or she is no longer seen as just labor; he or she “becomes a form of capital, that is to say a form of asset deployed with the intention of gaining advantage in the entertainment market and making profits” (5). McDonald suggests that the relationship between these two—labor and capital—is what truly makes a star important to the industry: “Unlike other performers, stars have greater power in the industry because of their dual capacity as labour *and* capital. The star becomes a form of capital inasmuch as his or her image can be used to create advantage in the market for films and secure profits. Because the image is not the person but rather a set of texts and meanings that signify the person, then the image is something separable from the star” (14).

Importantly, it is not only economic power that stars can wield, demanding and receiving particular salaries. They can also wield “symbolic” power in the industry, deciding with whom they will work, getting defunct projects off the ground, or even stepping into disputes between filmmakers and production heads. McDonald suggests that historically the tense relationships between studios and stars are the result of establishing who controls the star’s image and who profits from it: “In disputes over the control of a star’s image, the fundamental issue has always been who should participate in the profits from the representation and use of the star’s public identity. The tensions witnessed over the control of star images do not represent stars

attempting to challenge or oppose the capitalist logic of the film industry but rather to become something more than just labour by recognising and consolidating their status as capital" (119–20).

McDonald argues that the key to understanding star identity and its construction is to look at his or her economic relationship with the industry, including the conflicts in which he or she engages as well as the mutual benefits received as a result of this collaboration.

While both of these star studies look particularly at actors and actresses, they together offer a foundation when thinking about issues related to the star director. While the image of the star director may appear more "real" since there is usually no "fictional" image with which to compare, the director's star image is still constructed through extratextual sources. Like actors and actresses, the director's star image may expose, challenge, and manage conflicting ideologies. For example, a director associated with the horror genre will have a very different image from a director associated with prestige films that win Academy Awards, and they both may face the divide seen between profitability and art. The star director's image is also defined through relationships with others—most importantly, with the studio(s) with which he or she works. Like actors or actresses who use their clout to negotiate better terms (for example, location, pay, or choice of writer), star directors can wield tremendous economic power with studios. However, for star directors, symbolic power is often more important, and centers on issues such as final cut and how they are credited within the film.

In a *Newsweek* roundtable discussion with six Academy Award-nominated directors, film critics David Ansen and Jeff Giles asked Norman Jewison about his lengthy career in Hollywood and his relationship with the studios. Jewison responded, "I have always felt tremendous pressure from studios. Maybe it's because my pictures haven't been that interesting. 'Can we cut to the chase? Can you put more chases in? Can you cut it down?' All of this is brought to bear upon the filmmaker. And all you are trying to do is try to tell a story you believe in" (quoted in Ansen and Giles). While Jewison is known in the industry because of his distinguished career, he does not have the public recognition that would make him a star director. He articulates what is at stake in making studio films if you do not have a name like Shyamalan's that ensures (or helps to ensure) profitability for the studios. In the next section, I will look at how M. Night Shyamalan's construction in the media as a star director affords him not only substantial economic power within the industry but also the opportunity to negotiate the conflict between filmmaking as art and filmmaking as business that directors like Jewison, without powerful star images, are unable to bridge.

TWIN STRANDS: NEGOTIATING THE CONFLICT BETWEEN FILM AS ART AND BUSINESS

There are twin strands of Shyamalan's DNA, it seems to me—the very things that will keep him on minds and movie screens for years. A profound sincerity. And a profound ambition. We would never have known the one without the other. (Giles 55)

In the May 2003 issue, *Premiere* released its annual Power List—"The 100 Most Powerful People in Movies"—which included studio heads, producers, actors, actresses, and directors. Of this list, twenty-eight were primarily directors, a slightly lower figure than the thirty-seven who were actors or actresses. M. Night Shyamalan came in at number twenty-one, and was the fourth highest director behind Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Peter Jackson. Included in the article are a few caricatures of some of those who were ranked. Shyamalan's image is of an "A/V Club Captain" (the title the writers of the feature give to him), holding a camera, microphone, and sound recorder while wearing a buttoned-up plaid shirt, gray pants pulled up too high on his body, and black, thick glasses. On the cover of the magazine, he is named along with Spielberg and several actors and actresses as one of the elite to make the list.

As this image of him and the high ranking indicate in the Power List, a discourse has surrounded him as being both businessman and artist/film geek. Shyamalan's early success in the film industry spurred the debate between seeing film as art and film as business. Dyer's model of stars as the sites of ideological conflicts seems relevant here, since Shyamalan's star image foregrounded this conflict explicitly. In the press materials that discussed him (and in which he presented himself), several strands about this conflict are at work. The first is a focus on his background as a filmmaker before the box office and critical success of *The Sixth Sense* (1999), including his debacle working with Harvey Weinstein. The second is the continual stress on his films as "original," particularly in seasons of sequels and adaptations. The third is the idea of his films as cultural phenomena—as affecting the culture. Fourth are the continual links made between him and Spielberg. Taken together, these strands created a star image of Shyamalan as "magically" able to resolve the conflict between considering filmmaking as art as and as commerce.

Before Shyamalan's breakthrough with *The Sixth Sense*, he directed and wrote two other feature films. The first, *Praying with Anger* (1992), won the American Film Institute Debut Film Award in 1993 and was made on a \$750,000 budget, provided mainly from his family, and without studio support (Buschel). His next directorial feature was *Wide Awake* (1998),

produced through Miramax Films, a studio deemed artist and independent filmmaker friendly. For Shyamalan, however, constant clashes with studio head Harvey Weinstein proved anything but friendly. Rosie O'Donnell, one of the stars of the film, recounted a conversation she had with Weinstein to resolve some of these clashes: "I said, 'Listen, Harvey, I don't want you to release it unless it's Night's version . . . He's the artist. You're just the guy who frames it and sells it.' Well, you know what? That didn't go over big. He started saying, 'Who do you think you are? You're just a f—ing talk-show host!' He went *off*. I was stunned. I thought he *knew* that he acquired the films and that the other people were the artists" (quoted in Giles 53). In this article, Shyamalan is portrayed during his early career solely as an artist, without the power to counteract the powerful business model embodied by Weinstein. However, by the time Shyamalan made *Signs* (2002), his fifth feature, his status in the industry assured that he was now able to do both. According to Shyamalan, the business aspect of filmmaking was closely tied to his artistic ambitions:

You have this drive of "I gotta get this story out" and it's really important to me to get this story out emotionally. And then the filmmaker/businessman comes in and says . . . it's gotta be a success. You gotta do this. We have to orient it here. We got to promote it like this. We got to put it out here. You start thinking about all these things. There's a big side of me that's hardcore businessman. Because I choose to make a career based on my emotions. So I'm not just going to lay myself out there and then just get executed. (quoted in "Full Circle")

Shyamalan's two early box office failures and clashes with Weinstein provided him with the impetus for grounding original and artistic filmmaking with a thorough knowledge of the business.

Although neither of his first two features has been widely seen, they are acknowledged by film critics and the press, along with his next three features, as encompassing original ideas and artistic filmmaking, especially in relation to other films released around the same time. Five of his features have been released during the summer—*The Sixth Sense*, *Signs*, *The Village* (2004), *Lady in the Water* (2006), and his most recent film, *The Happening* (2008)—while one, *Unbreakable* (2000), was released during the busy 2000 Thanksgiving holiday season. In a CNN interview, Daryn Kagan suggested that it was "interesting" that *Signs* was so successful during the busy summer box office season given that it was not *Signs 12*. He then asked Shyamalan how difficult it is to produce and create an "original" film in a seasonal environment where sequels and adaptations tend to dominate. Shyamalan responded:

How do we fit in now making original movies in this landscape where everybody is making sequels, things based on things you know, like a book or a TV show or a cartoon character, like Scooby Doo, or a comic book character there. And there is a sense of people wanting familiarity before they will commit their money to come see it. And they will come in droves to see something familiar, whether it is good or not, they will come in droves because they are familiar with it. Where does an original idea stand in all that? The way the audience came this whole week and the way it has started, it's just been an amazing thing for us, because we were really holding our breath. (quoted in Kagan)

Jeff Giles, a journalist for *Newsweek*, built upon this idea of familiar fare, and suggested, "This summer [2002] has been a rush of franchise pictures based on pre-existing concepts and characters. Of course, attendance is up 15 percent—and so is self-congratulation. Which means it's getting exponentially less likely that mainstream filmmakers will do anything as radical as sit down and try to, you know, think stuff up" (51). In this regard, Shyamalan was appreciated for bringing original stories to the screen, and was applauded for his ability to challenge the sequels and familiar fare for box office dominance, again being able to consolidate the diverging roles of filmmaker as artist and businessman.

One of the ways that Shyamalan was presented as challenging less original fare is through the discussion of his films as cultural phenomena. Shyamalan himself defined these films as "getting under everybody's skin" and listed films such as *The Exorcist* (1973), *Jaws* (1975), and *The Godfather* (1972) among films that have become cultural touchstones (quoted in "A Conversation with M. Night Shyamalan"). For example, *Jaws* can be seen as a cultural phenomenon for the fear of shark attacks it inspired in beachgoers the summer the film was released. To the degree that Jay Leno spoofed *The Sixth Sense* on *The Tonight Show*, sitcoms referred to the film and its tag line ("I see dead people"), and several horror films tried to tie into its success (either through their marketing campaigns or in moving up their release dates), *The Sixth Sense* may also be defined as such. Likewise, *Signs* inspired the release of a number of documentaries and news articles about crop circles, and the simultaneous release of the *Newsweek* cover story on Shyamalan with the film suggested that both the filmmaker and film were cultural phenomena. In an interview, Shyamalan indicated he wanted this cultural status for *Signs*: "I don't care about the box office. . . . I care about the connection. I want it to be a phenomenon—a cultural phenomenon, where the audience feels some connection to this place, these people and what was being said here. That's *Jaws*, *E. T.* [1982], *The Exorcist* [1973]. All those movies. They just *connected*" (quoted in Giles 55).

It is interesting, though, that every film he acknowledges as “connected” and as a cultural phenomenon was a major box office hit as well. Both *Signs* and *The Sixth Sense*, like these other films, balanced an effect on the culture with their box office success.² Indeed, it seems as though cultural phenomena are directly tied not only to public and critical discussion and appreciation but also to box office receipts.

Besides having had an impact on the culture, Shyamalan’s early films, and the director himself, were often compared to Steven Spielberg and his work. An article in the *Ottawa Citizen* called Shyamalan “the new Spielberg,” while the *Newsweek* cover story mentioned at the beginning of this essay dubbed him “the next Spielberg” (Kelly, Giles). Shyamalan’s success at combining art with successful films at the box office mirrored Spielberg’s status as a filmmaker, according to writer Christopher Kelly. “The film industry has always worshipped those filmmakers who can consistently appeal to both critics and audiences, who can create movies that are serious-minded and commercially viable. Spielberg is at the head of a very small pack” (Kelly). Jeff Giles suggested that the two filmmakers’ themes and styles were similar: “Shyamalan is more akin to the young Spielberg in his careful rippling of the heartstrings, his deft touch with child actors, his fascination with the middle-class American family and his desperate desire to keep pleasing the same demographic over and over: people between the ages of 10 and 100” (50).

Shyamalan and Spielberg were also linked because of their youth when they achieved fame—both were twenty-nine when they became star directors. Both had trouble with earlier studio work (Spielberg with *The Sugarland Express* [1974]) before their hits. Both of the films that gave them their star status—*The Sixth Sense* and *Jaws*—earned multiple Academy Award nominations (six and four, respectively). Both were thrillers/horror films that reinvigorated the genre. One of the most interesting developments about Shyamalan’s relationship to Spielberg came when he was asked to cowrite the fourth installment of the Indiana Jones series that Spielberg and George Lucas created. Although the collaboration eventually fell through, it is interesting that Shyamalan’s writing style was seen as a natural fit to Spielberg and Lucas’s model of filmmaking.³ The linkage between Shyamalan and Spielberg in particular helped validate Shyamalan as a filmmaker who could not only deliver a box office hit but also create critically acclaimed work.

Like Spielberg, Shyamalan was deemed both an artist and a showman. As the opening quote for this section demonstrates, there is a “sincerity” linked to his subject matter and filmmaking style and an “ambition” to be the best, to be number one at the box office. Shyamalan, in several

interviews, linked these notions as if they are inseparable to his filmmaking. In a roundtable interview with five other directors, Shyamalan claimed that he could never make *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999) even though he loved the film and subject matter because he does not have the courage to do so—that is, to receive negative feedback at preview screenings and not to receive successful box office results (Ansen and Giles). Ambition and sincerity are, to an extent, counterposed within filmmaking and within this comment. At this point in his career, Shyamalan had learned firsthand the problems a director encounters producing “uncommercial” material (particularly with the *Wide Awake* debacle). In response to a question about *Wide Awake*, Shyamalan claimed, “I never want to be weakened and victimized again” (quoted in Giles 54).

By producing, writing, and directing films that were not only commercial successes but also critical ones, Shyamalan’s image as a “star” filmmaker in his early career carefully negotiated the line draw between Hollywood filmmaking as art versus business. While the public and industry portrayal of his image smoothed over the bumps in this division, his construction through marketing techniques clearly indicated how much his role as star is dependent upon the economic forces at work in the industry.

“JUST SAY MY NAME”: MARKETING THE STAR DIRECTOR

“I don’t want 20 years from now for people to walk around and go, ‘He’s the guy who did “The Sixth Sense.”’ It should be, ‘He’s the guy who did “The Sixth Sense,” “Unbreakable” and so on.’ It shouldn’t even be that. It should be, just say my name, and it represents a body of work” (Shyamalan, quoted in Farley).

As McDonald suggests, stardom is an essential feature of the studio system. To be able to differentiate your product from the myriad other films available for consumption becomes imperative in such a competitive industry. With the success of *The Sixth Sense*, Shyamalan’s next films were marketed very differently from his earlier films. Focusing on his image as both a bankable director and an artistic one, the marketing campaigns centered on Shyamalan as the main selling point of the films. In this section, I will start by examining the promotional aspects of his films and on the DVDs for his films. Next, I will consider the phenomenon of the “twist” ending prevalent in his films and how that in itself works as a marketing tool. Finally, I will consider how Shyamalan became a brand name through studio marketing practices. While all of these different aspects are either developed or promoted by the studio system, they can only be understood as a relationship between the director and the studio. The image of the star director is a mutually beneficial relationship between

the director and the studio, one that explicitly combines the economic and artistic aspects of the industry as part of its strategy for selling more tickets and ancillary products.

Although Shyamalan had directed two films prior to *The Sixth Sense*, neither of them emerged as box office hits. Thus, the trailers and the posters for *The Sixth Sense*, as well as other promotional materials, focused on Bruce Willis's star power to sell the film. Shyamalan's next film, *Unbreakable*, featured the tag "From M. Night Shyamalan, Writer/Director of 'The Sixth Sense'," as a link to the previous film's success, in addition to the names of Bruce Willis and Samuel L. Jackson above the film's title. With *Signs*, the tag changed to read "M. Night Shyamalan's 'Signs,'" although Mel Gibson's name was still prevalent in the materials, and with *The Village*, the promotional materials clearly identified the film as "M. Night Shyamalan's 'The Village,'" without any references to the film's stars. This practice has continued with his more recent films. *Lady in the Water* was promoted as "A Bedtime Story Written and Directed by M. Night Shyamalan," without the names of any of the film's stars. The promotional materials clearly demonstrate a change in stature for Shyamalan, as *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, and *Signs* focus on the primary stars acting in the films. Beginning with *Signs*, the promotional materials began to reflect a possessory credit for Shyamalan. With *The Village* and *Lady in the Water*, Shyamalan's name is the only name listed, an indication of his star stature.

With the DVD release of Shyamalan's films starting with *The Sixth Sense*, there has been an attempt to contextualize these films as *his*



Shyamalan playing Vick in *Lady in the Water*

creations. Several of his DVDs feature excerpts from movies he made as a teenager, and they are tangentially related to the feature film. With the DVD of *Unbreakable*, for example, Shyamalan includes his first fight sequence, a tie-in to the action sequences showcased in the feature film. In each of the introductions to these home movies, Shyamalan acknowledges his lack of skill as a teenaged filmmaker, pointing out how a viewer can see the boom or wires, for example, and contrasts his much earlier filmmaking endeavors with his current skills as a feature film director. He also attempts to relate each film back to something he has experienced in his life. In "A Conversation with M. Night Shyamalan" on *The Sixth Sense* DVD, Shyamalan discusses how his small role in the film as an emergency room doctor came from his family's initial desire to see him become a doctor. In the documentary "Looking for Signs" on the *Signs* DVD, he recounts a scary story from his youth that informed his approach to the alien invasion occurring in the film. These aspects, together with his roles in each of his films, situate the films as *his* creations, emphasizing himself as the most important figure related to and unifying the films.⁴

The key stylistic element that has linked many of his films together is the plot twist, which occurs just minutes from the films' endings. *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, *Signs*, and *The Village* all feature a twist in the last few minutes, an effect that Shyamalan claimed "is not something you can just add on at the end of a film. It needs to be in the basic fabric of the movie. If it is just some extra turn, people aren't going to be satisfied" (quoted in Chetwynd D8). The marketing approach to the DVDs of his films is to assume that the viewer has seen the film(s) already and is using the DVD as an additional source of information. Part of the reason the DVDs are set up this way is to give viewers multiple opportunities to rewatch the films to see how the final twists of the films were skillfully constructed. *The Sixth Sense* DVD includes a tutorial on how the film presents hints throughout the story of the twist that Dr. Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) is himself a ghost that only Cole (Haley Joel Osment) can see and hear. For example, in the tutorial, the filmmaker describes how Anna Crowe (Olivia Williams) eats alone at a restaurant with clearly one place setting and never interacts with her husband when he arrives late to their "date." Although the construction of the DVDs acts as a perfect vehicle for figuring out how the final twist was achieved, the incorporation of material that emphasizes rewatching the films is also a marketing ploy tied into Shyamalan's most identifiable narrative trait. His status as an auteur who uses trick endings requires multiple viewings, an aspect that helps ensure larger grosses at the box office and in ancillary markets like DVD and video.

In addition to the marketing of Shyamalan through DVDs and videos as a star director, network and cable television also have been indispensable in branding the filmmaker and his films. With the impending release of *The Village* in the summer of 2004, ABC created “2 Days of Night” with the presentation of *The Sixth Sense* on April 26 and the network television premiere of *Unbreakable* on May 3. Shyamalan hosted both movies by discussing his latest project and showing trailers and behind-the-scenes footage of *The Village*. In announcing the unusual move by the network, Oren Aviv, the President of Buena Vista Pictures Marketing, claimed, “We are excited to be able to share this early look at M. Night Shyamalan’s new movie, and we thought that now would be the perfect time as ABC presents two of his classics” (“2 Days of Night”). Missing from his statement, however, is the vested interest the company had in promoting *The Village* on ABC since the network and the film’s production company, Touchstone Pictures, are both part of the Walt Disney Company media conglomerate. Marketing Shyamalan and his films on the network was a corporate strategy to increase ratings and box office grosses for several of their properties at the same time. Shyamalan’s star image, thus, cannot be divorced from the economic purpose it serves within the film industry, particularly with his relationship to Disney, the company that produced and distributed *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, *Signs*, and *The Village*.

In addition to the “2 Days of Night” shown on ABC, the Syfy Channel presented an “unauthorized” look at Shyamalan weeks before *The Village* opened in theaters. Although the film’s “unauthorized” access to Shyamalan was revealed to be a hoax days before the documentary aired, *The Buried Secret of M. Night Shyamalan* was initially marketed as a look at the elusive director and his filmmaking methods, not as yet another promotional piece for *The Village*. The three-hour documentary asserted that Shyamalan had a relationship with the spirit world and that bizarre events occurred around him. For example, when the documentary filmmakers attempted to record a conversation that Shyamalan did not want on record, the equipment malfunctioned without explanation. The Associated Press, not realizing the documentary was a marketing ploy, ran an article about the rocky relationship between the Syfy Channel, the documentary filmmakers, and Shyamalan that was picked up by several news organizations. Although the Syfy Channel and its new parent company, NBC Universal, emerged red-faced from the incident, the documentary succeeded in bringing more attention to the release of *The Village* and in establishing Shyamalan as a star worthy of a prime-time special, albeit on a specialty cable network.

Taken together, these marketing aspects of his films certainly established Shyamalan as a star. But they also pointed to corporate strategies where the emergence, creation, and promotion of a star director help the bottom line of the films through box office receipts and sales in ancillary markets. These corporate strategies are less about the foregrounding of an important film artist; rather, they are an attempt to profit from that image. Thus, the star director has an important economic function in the industry. For Shyamalan, his status as a star director is a collaborative business strategy.

CONCLUSION: SHYAMALAN'S PLACE IN CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD

As the line separating studio and independent cinema grows continually fuzzier, the star image of M. Night Shyamalan points to the tensions directors face while working in the contemporary film industry. Although only his first two films as director might be considered truly independent, his body of work reflects character-based dramas more typical of contemporary American independent film than studio creations. Indeed, with the production of *Lady in the Water*, Shyamalan likened the experience to making an independent film. In an interview with *Ain't It Cool News* Web site founder Harry Knowles, Shyamalan described what he felt his place was in the current film industry:

You know, I've been trying to kind of find this balance between what I love about independent cinema and its lack of generalizing and it's [sic] lack of chasing its audience. You know what I mean? And yet, have it on a map released at a mass scale, you know, because it has universal elements to it that allow it to be loved by people all over the world but at the same time it's a very natural pore on both sides because I do love the independent world. So, the fact that you make a movie with both those elements, sometimes I feel like have no place and sometimes I feel like I have a home everywhere. It depends on what day you catch me. (quoted in Knowles)

Indeed, Shyamalan himself articulated his precarious position as a star director in contemporary Hollywood rather directly—as both working inside the system and against it.

Shyamalan's star image is based on these contradictory assumptions about authorship in the industry. As such, he is not the only director working in the industry who has emerged as a star and operates within a system of countervailing beliefs about filmmaking. But Shyamalan's star image uniquely demonstrates the tensions at work in contemporary

American film. Simultaneously serving as a director with a personal voice and as a marketing asset to the studios, M. Night Shyamalan's star image reveals not only the importance of the star director image but also the contradictions inherent in such a position.

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NOTES

1. Before being purchased by the Walt Disney Company, Miramax was an independent film distribution and production studio. Even after the Disney merger, Miramax continued to pick up independent films to distribute. Although clashes between filmmakers and the two Weinstein brothers are well known in the industry, Miramax also has developed key early relationships with filmmakers such as Robert Rodriguez, Quentin Tarantino, and Kevin Smith, promoting the studio as filmmaker (and thus independent film) friendly.
2. *The Sixth Sense* (1999) earned \$293 million at the domestic box office and was the second-highest-grossing film of 1999. *Signs* (2002) made \$227 million at the domestic box office and was the fifth-highest-grossing film in 2002. (Box office information available from “The Top 250 of 1999” and “Top 250 of 2002,” respectively.)
3. Included on the DVD for *The Village* (2004) is an excerpt of a short film of Shyamalan’s, produced while he was a teenager, where he mimics the opening of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), an indication of the film’s importance and influence on him.
4. In each of his films since *The Sixth Sense*, Shyamalan has played a role in the narrative (not a cameo as Alfred Hitchcock did in each of his films). In *The Sixth Sense*, he is an emergency room doctor who attends to Cole (Haley Joel Osment). In *Unbreakable*, he is a drug dealer at the stadium where David Dunn (Bruce Willis) works. In *Signs*, he has his largest part as a veterinarian who has killed Graham’s wife (Patricia Kalember) in a car accident. In *The Village*, he is a guard at the park outside of the village. In *Lady in the Water*, he plays a writer experiencing writer’s block while living in the central apartment complex.

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FEATURE TWO

STORIES BY SHYAMALAN

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SIGMUND FREUD,
PEDOPHILE PRIESTS, AND
SHYAMALAN'S FILMIC FAIRY
TALE (*THE SIXTH SENSE*)

JANE F. THRAILKILL

FOR THE INITIATED, THE BASIC PLOT IS UNFORGETTABLE: A dashing young psychoanalyst (let's call him M) is reaching the height of his career. Recognized for his brilliance and dedication, M receives adoration verging on celebrity—not least by an important woman in his life (let's call her Anna). But then the doctor discovers a shocking surprise just outside Anna's bedroom. M's life now comes crashing down around him as he sacrifices everything, including his relationship with Anna, to seek the truth: What *did* plague severely disturbed patients seeking psychoanalytic help? After poring over cases from the archive, M has an astonishing revelation: suffering neurotic patients, with their ghastly tales of violence and abuse, had been haunted not by mere fantasies but by *real people*. Worse, the devoted doctor famous for healing troubled patients had in fact failed them utterly. The story, notoriously, ends with the abrupt termination of the analyst.

The above sketches the dramatic rise and precipitous fall of Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, the rebel psychoanalyst who in the 1970s had assumed the prestigious directorship of the Sigmund Freud Archives, a priceless collection of documents related to the founding of psychoanalysis. Freud's daughter, Anna, had given the charming Masson unprecedented access to her father's correspondence. "In a large black cupboard outside Anna Freud's bedroom" (xiv), Masson reports, he found letters indicating that Freud's early patients had been sexually abused as children.

This revelation flew in the face of Freudian dogma—unquestioningly supported by Anna Freud and the psychoanalytic establishment—that neurotic patients did not *remember* childhood sexual abuse but merely *fantasized* such encounters. Psychoanalysis, Masson maintained, was built on this false foundation, including key concepts such as the psychological importance of fantasy, infantile sexuality, and the Oedipus complex. Masson published *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*, which argued that Freud's early patients were actually abused in childhood; not surprisingly, he was fired from the Archives, shunned by Anna Freud, and reviled by the psychoanalytic establishment.

The plot sketched above also presents a fair précis of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999), suggesting a deep plausibility in critics' tendency to read the film in psychoanalytic terms.¹ The film, after all, centers on a psychoanalyst, who (like the viewer) initially traces a young boy's psychic troubles to his father's desertion. Yet critics have tended to use psychoanalytic theory as an interpretive key, rather than examining how *The Sixth Sense* both invokes and offers a highly contemporary *corrective* to Freud's psychic system. The film, as I discuss in this chapter, echoes the crusade of Jeffrey M. Masson to bring to light the actual sexual abuse suffered by Freud's early patients. When Cole (Haley Joel Osment) says "I see dead people," it is neither fantasy nor mere metaphor. The movie's essential plot point turns on the boy's convincing his therapist that he means literally what he says.

While invoking the Masson scandal, Shyamalan also subtly directs the viewer's attention to much more recent and indeed infamous instances of child "seduction": the sex abuse scandal within the Catholic church. The terms are remarkably similar: Psychically damaged individuals—mainly boys—described horrific abuse by authority figures, had their testimony dismissed as falsehood and fantasy, yet turned out to be telling the truth. *The Sixth Sense*, in other words, invokes *two* institution-rocking scandals—one that transpired within Freudian psychoanalysis, the other within the Catholic church—along with the ethical and the epistemological questions the scandals raised. Both institutions tend to the secrets of the fragile human soul, both engage in highly elaborate rituals of confession and redemption, and both have core stories about the destiny-shaping importance of a child, or childhood itself. Both, in response to scandal, deployed accusations of fantasy to prop up deeply contradictory myths about children being innocent even as they are potentially corrupted and corrupting, and about the moral unassailability of institutions that affirm the quasi-divinity of certain authority figures while providing the all-too-terrestrial conditions for abuse. By making implicit reference

to these events, *The Sixth Sense* challenges us to revise some of our dearest, and most damaging, culturally held beliefs—not just about the power and purity of therapists and priests but also about the roles of adults in general in the lives of children.

This essay considers how *The Sixth Sense*, in its narrative structure, its portrayal of a “haunted” child, and its focus on an attentive adult who may be monstrous, enlists two seemingly contradictory generic forms: the fairy tale and the horror movie. In this way, Shyamalan’s film reverses psychoanalytic history, in which horrific accounts of child sexual abuse were recast as infantile fantasies. By invoking the “pedophile priest” scandal, *The Sixth Sense* reinforces the point, at once ethical and epistemological, that children (and therapy patients in general) often suffer from more than, as Freud put it in *Studies on Hysteria*, “reminiscences” (36). Yet unlike the almost gleeful scandal-mongering of Jeffrey M. Masson, or the scandalized public reaction to priest sexual abuse—both of which cast children as pure victims and predatory adults as pure anomalies—*The Sixth Sense* affirms the efficacy of the psychoanalytic fairy tale, which brings to light the complexities of human desire and the range of feelings, from rage and despair to playfulness and joy, experienced by children and adults alike. But, whereas Freudian psychoanalysis suggests that human beings seek and don’t find each other through a wash of transferences, and whereas its debunkers construe adult-child relations as barely restrained acts of predation, *The Sixth Sense* finally affirms that collaborative acts of imagination, engaged in by children alongside adults, can foster connections and help to create the conditions of possibility for a more livable future. The film both portrays and performs the imaginative function, I conclude, that Bruno Bettelheim attributed to the fairy tale: “We are not comfortable with the thought that occasionally we look like threatening giants to our children, although we do . . . Fairy stories provide reassurance to children that they can eventually get the better of the giant—i.e. they can grow up to be like the giant and acquire the same powers” (27–28).

FREUD’S SEDUCTION THEORY REDUX

“It sounds like a scientific fairy tale”: This was the reaction (according to Freud) of the eminent psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, upon hearing Freud’s “On the Aetiology of Hysteria” (1897), a paper that traced adults’ hysterical symptoms to “sexual experiences in childhood” (Schur 104). Freud’s account upended the reigning medical theory—that hysteria was hereditary—promulgated by French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot; it also distinguished Freud’s position from that of Joseph Breuer (Freud’s psychoanalytic collaborator), who had a “personal disinclination”

to singling out the “sexual factor”—a disinclination that Freud “originally shared” (“Aetiology” 267). Yet Freud finally decided the sexual factor was unavoidable, for his hysterical patients testified to intimate trauma at the hands of adults and occasionally other children.

Freud’s “seduction theory” thus came in two stages, the second repudiating the first. After initially reporting that many of his neurotic patients had been sexually abused, Freud a few years later reinterpreted the reports of his patients, construing them not as testimony but as psychically informative delusions. Freud later wrote in *An Autobiographical Study*, “I believed these [patients’] stories, and consequently supposed that I had discovered the roots of the subsequent neurosis in these experiences of sexual seduction in childhood” (34). In the words of Freud scholar Douglas Davis, “From an empiricist concern with detecting, unearthing, and detoxifying the residues of *actual* traumatic events in the patient’s past, Freud moved to a hermeneutics of desire in which the emotional connotations rather than the facticity of childish memory shape the neurotic process and point to its cure.” Most scholars agree that Freud, in recasting tales of physical abuse as potent psychological fantasies, resolved his “scientific fairy tale” into the science and medical therapy of psychoanalysis.²

Freud’s retrenchment also reversed the roles of aggressor and victim. Neurotics (both as children and then as adult patients) were reconstrued as provocateurs, channeling their hostilities toward their parents into erotic fantasies of domination. This oddly adversarial relationship extended to analyst and patient, with the latter cast as a potential (and potent) antagonist. Most famous in this regard is Freud’s case study of “Dora,” an intelligent but suicidally depressed eighteen-year-old woman named Ida Bauer whose father brought her to Freud for treatment. As Freud wrote in “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,” Dora had accused an older man Freud calls “Herr K” (a friend of Dora’s father) of making “immoral suggestions” to her, something her father decided was “a phantasy” (41). Freud concurred, deciding that Dora’s fourteen-year-old response to Herr K’s groping and kissing (“a violent feeling of disgust”) was a hysterical reaction (43). Dora’s accusations, Freud concluded, resulted from her “craving for revenge” (132) after the older man stopped his sexual advances. When Dora abruptly terminated analysis, Freud interpreted her act similarly, as an “an unmistakable act of vengeance” toward him (131). It is striking to note that this reversal of victim and aggressor reappears a century later in the case of predatory priests: as Garry Wills has written, “A report of one of Father Shanley’s talks in the 1970s says: ‘He stated that the adult is not the seducer, the “kid” is the seducer.’”

In Freud's repudiation of his "scientific fairy tale," victims became antagonists and testimony was recast as fantasy. It is appropriate, then, that a contemporary fairy tale, M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*, provokes a reconsideration of Freud's seduction theory by forcing us to confront the hermeneutics of our own cultural desires that circulate around the figure of the "haunted" child. Appearing a century after Freud's seduction hypothesis, *The Sixth Sense* starred Bruce Willis as the kindly child psychiatrist Malcolm Crowe. It may seem odd to construe this notoriously creepy movie as a fairy tale (Shyamalan himself has said that *The Sixth Sense* was his first stab at the genre of the horror film and that it was *The Lady in the Water* [2006] that took on the conventions of a children's tale³). But in portraying a therapeutic relationship where no money is exchanged and the endlessly available therapist not only makes house calls but also pursues his skittish patient through the streets of Philadelphia (a telling inversion of Bill Murray's character in *What About Bob?* [1991], or Robert De Niro's in *Analyze This* [1999], where the patient stalks the analyst), *The Sixth Sense* suggests that in this adult-child therapeutic encounter, the fairy tale and the horror film are perhaps not the opposed genres we might think.

The movie sets up a jarring generic experience in opening scenes that juxtapose a storybook bourgeois fantasy with an encounter of chilling terror. In the cozily erotic first scene, a handsome psychiatrist and his lovely wife sip wine while reading the inscription on a plaque that (we learn) the husband was awarded earlier that evening: "In recognition for his outstanding achievement in the field of child psychology, his dedication to his work, and his continuing efforts to improve the quality of life for countless children and their families, the City of Philadelphia proudly bestows upon its son Dr. Malcolm Crowe the Mayor's Citation for Professional Excellence." As his wife Anna (Olivia Williams) laughingly observes, Malcolm adopts the role of happy child, speaking the movie's first lines with a Dr. Seuss-like inversion: "That's one fine frame. A fine frame it is." However, as the amorous, adorable, and decidedly tipsy couple enters their bedroom, they—and viewers—are shocked by the appearance of Vincent Grey (Donnie Wahlberg), naked and trembling in their bathroom. A former patient (ten when he was in therapy with Malcolm) and now a psychotic young man, the intruder mocks the wording on the plaque: "Let's all celebrate, Dr. Malcolm Crowe. Recipient of awards from the Mayor on the news. Dr. Malcolm Crowe, he's helped so many children." The intruder levels this accusation at Malcolm—"I was afraid—you called it anxiety. [beat] You were wrong"—before shooting his former therapist and then turning the gun on himself. The power inversion in

this first scene is stunning: eminent therapist reduced to abject victim, tormented adolescent equipped with vengeful potency.

This beginning serves as a preamble to the film's central plot, which focuses on Malcolm's subsequent treatment of another haunted young boy, the nine-year-old Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment). Having failed to cure or indeed to prevent the suicide of his earlier patient, Malcolm, a year after the shooting and apparently healed, turns his sights on the new boy, whose symptoms are identical to Vincent's: "acute anxiety . . . possible mood disorder . . . parent status—divorced . . . communication difficulty between mother-child dyad." The well-trained viewer, familiar with the tropes of psychoanalysis, surmises that the therapist is trying to exorcise his guilt over the first boy by helping Cole. Shyamalan visually reinforces the element of repetition: Cole's brown hair has a noticeable white patch, just like the suicidal youth in the bathroom.

The opening scene in Malcolm's home portrayed a fairy-tale moment disrupted by the intrusion of horror. The next scene, in which Cole first meets his therapist, also yokes together fairy tale elements and horror conventions, though in more subtle form. Both elements are present as Malcolm, sitting on a park bench and perusing his notes, sees his potential young patient emerge from an imposing building, scurry through desolate streets, then disappear into a Catholic church. Primed by Malcolm's award, the viewer assumes the analyst's benevolence as he follows the scared, fatherless boy. Malcolm then approaches Cole inside the church, apologizing for missing their (presumably earlier) appointment and gently asking about the game Cole is playing in the pew with his toy soldiers. This scenario is a recognizable preamble to an important modern fairy tale: the male Cinderella story in which a (himself damaged) teacher or coach, working for love rather than money, stands in for missing or misunderstanding fathers; for example, *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *October Sky* (1995), and *Facing the Giants* (2006). By coaxing prodigious feats from dispossessed youth, the father figure in turn succeeds in healing himself.

Yet *The Sixth Sense* draws not only on modern fairy tales but also on horror films. The camera, occupying the trajectory of Malcolm's gaze, captures Cole's palpable fear as the boy emerges from the massive doors of his school. Cole hesitates and looks around as if expecting an ambush, then places uncannily large eyeglasses on his face, as if to disguise himself. When the anxious boy enters a heavy stone building, the camera follows Malcolm's gaze upward to reveal a church steeple topped by a cross. In a classic horror movie trope, Malcolm hesitates slightly—as in *The Exorcist* (1973) or *The Omen* (1976), where the presence of crosses and sanctified space cause searing pain in demonic characters, before entering the sanctuary. These details

conspire to make the viewer feel edgy, even in the absence of anything to fear—a feeling that echoes Malcolm’s trepidation as he returns to his profession after being shot by a patient with a “mood disorder” and “anxiety,” just like Cole. The viewer identifies with the *therapist’s* apprehension as he seeks (to invoke cliché that unites pop psychology with religious practice) to face and to exorcise his personal demons.

Yet think of the situation Shyamalan has established: Malcolm’s “demon” takes the form of a scrawny, solitary, and terrified nine-year-old boy, whose first encounter with his therapist has the elements and the pace of a chase scene. No parent is present, and the therapeutic “session” takes place in a deserted church. This scene encrypts some crucial questions, ones that are posed by the film at large. The first is explicable within the context of psychoanalytic history and Freud’s repudiation of the seduction theory: are neurotic, “haunted” boys victims in need of help or are they delusional, even potential aggressors? To this question Shyamalan’s deft filmmaking adds another: does Malcolm’s attentiveness reveal exemplary dedication to the welfare of children, or is he a creepy stranger stalking a frightened boy? Does the church figure the therapeutic promise of psychoanalysis, the modern sanctuary for the suffering soul (with the wounded therapist as a sort of Christ figure) or does it invoke a classic horror movie motif, casting Malcolm as a demonic pursuer? The overwrought first encounter between Malcolm and Cole, in short, picks up and exploits a central tension within psychoanalysis about whether the patient is a victim or an aggressor. Shyamalan’s addition, however, is to encrypt elements that situate the analyst in a similarly ambiguous light. Is Malcolm like a pedophile priest, or a renegade reformer like Jeffrey M. Masson (or the journalists for the *Boston Globe* who broke the sexual abuse scandal within the Catholic church)?⁴

“PART HERO, PART HORROR”

The ending of *The Sixth Sense* makes the strange and brilliant case that Malcolm haunts as well as heals Cole—that he actually heals himself and his patient by virtue of his haunting. Before considering the film’s famous final plot twist, I’d like to elaborate further a pertinent referential framework for reading this scene of a vulnerable boy who, within a Catholic church, finds himself in the presence of “devoted” adult authority, a grownup whose overzealous attentiveness provokes unspecifiable fear, and who fits the conventions of modern saintliness but also accrues associations of the demonic. (Notably, the headline of a *Boston Globe* report on the clerical abuse scandal in 2002 echoes the hero/horror dichotomy of *The Sixth Sense*: “If They Knew the Madness in Me?: A Search for the Real Rev. Paul Shanley Suggests He was Part Hero, Part Horror.”)

The title of Catholic historian Philip Jenkins's book encapsulates this context: *Pedophiles and Priests: Anatomy of a Contemporary Crisis*. Though Jenkins, writing in the mid-1990s, argued against the "myth of the pedophile priest," in 2002 the *Boston Globe* broke the story of Paul Shanley, a priest who was subsequently jailed (and then killed in prison) for repeatedly raping a fourteen-year-old boy enrolled in his catechism class in the 1980s. (*The Sixth Sense* appeared exactly in between these two important moments, in 1999.) Since that time, the Catholic church throughout the world has been inundated with lawsuits and accusations of abuse. In "Scandal," Garry Wills reports that accused priests often believed themselves to be "helping" troubled boys, "to whom they could offer their sexual 'ministrations' as a solution to their problems." Along these lines Wills cites Alberto Moravia's novel *The Conformist*, about a man molested as a child, which he sees as being "remarkably insightful on the way the child is presented as 'needing' because of his previous disturbance—but to whom the 'healing' becomes a curse." *The Sixth Sense* picks up on this troubling notion, a "healing" that is a "curse."

Only in the final scenes do the viewers unambiguously discover that Malcolm has not just been helping but has also been haunting his young patient. However, child abuse and its strategic concealment are thematized throughout Shyamalan's film. A nice-seeming older boy named Tommy (Trevor Morgan) walks Cole to school, but once alone he drops his charade, swats the younger boy on the head and taunts him as "freak." Later, a traumatized Cole ends up in the hospital after the same bully, having snowed Cole's mother Lynn (Toni Collette), traps him in a garret from which Cole (and the viewer) is horrified to hear a man's malevolent, insinuating whisper. The attending doctor suspiciously questions Cole's mother about wounds on her son's body. (The devoted physician unearthing abuse, epitomized by the child-avenging George Clooney in old *ER* episodes, is now a classic element of today's medical fairy tales.) To drive home the film's central engagement with the question of violence against children, the skeptical, Clooney-esque physician Dr. Hill is played by the director Shyamalan himself. Even Malcolm entertains briefly the possibility that there is abuse or unspecified family trauma in Cole's home that is precipitating the boy's "delusions"—causing Cole, as he eventually, haltingly whispers to his therapist, to "see dead people."

Tellingly, the ghosts that haunt Cole (figures whom Malcolm cannot see, though the viewer can) are themselves walking testimony to violence in the home or sexual transgression: a boy whose friend blew off half his head with his father's gun, a woman who eludes her abusive husband by cutting her wrists, a child from colonial times who was hanged

alongside his (adulterous?) parents, a vomiting young girl whose mother slowly poisoned her by feeding her cleaning fluids. Presiding over the entire movie is the stripped, strung-out figure in Malcolm's bathroom in the first scene, who mocks the notion that the therapist has "helped so many children . . . And he doesn't even remember my name?" Malcolm visibly gropes to retrieve the memory of his former patient, listing a string of names before he remembers, "—Vincent?" Relieved, the doctor says, "I do remember you, Vincent. You were a good kid. Very smart . . . Quiet . . . Compassionate . . . Unusually compassionate . . ." But the trembling, agonized young man interrupts, "You forgot 'cursed.' . . . You failed me." In this scene, talk of sensitivity and healing abruptly turns to talk of being cursed.

Present from the beginning, the film's focus on adults who either passively failed or actively abused children is easily visible upon a second viewing. Once one *does* begin to look, terrified children haunted by some unspeakable treatment at the hands of adults are present at almost every turn of *The Sixth Sense*. Yet as the film unfolds in narrative time, the theme of child abuse is almost completely irretrievable. This aspect of the film's narrative structure, even more than the imagery and invocation of child abuse, powerfully evokes the scandal unfolding within the Catholic church in the years since the film's release. Both *The Sixth Sense* and the clerical abuse cases exemplify the epistemological and ethical entailments of what one might term the "ah ha!" reading of child abuse. This played out on the U. S. cultural stage when the notion that some priests could have been attacking the youngest members of their flocks was first unimaginable, then unavoidable. Wills reports, "One of the abused boys in Boston was struck in the face by his mother when he told her a priest had molested him. What is unthinkable to mothers becomes unsayable to victims." Unthinkable to mothers, and also to teachers: one thinks of Cole, who quickly learns to stop drawing pictures of bloody violence and turns instead to rainbows.

Viewed straight, it is all but impossible to read the kindly Bruce Willis character as anything but a child-avenging therapeutic hero. After the denouement, when Malcolm visits his sleeping wife and realizes she's been clutching the wedding ring that should be on his finger, viewers (and Malcolm himself) are forced to reread the entire character, to comb back through the string of slightly odd, off-kilter events for all the hints of the doctor's real (i.e., *dead*) status. The film reveals the healer to be a "horror"; Malcolm, a dead person believing himself to be alive, has been haunting rather than psychoanalyzing his patient. Cole is not merely "haunted" by memories or fantasies, but by his own analyst.

The film invokes the scandal within the Catholic church and also—in bringing the psychical and the supernatural into stunning convergence—returns psychoanalysis to its occult roots. As historian Henri Ellenberger explains in *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, psychical healings can be traced back to supernatural practices and beliefs, in particular the Catholic church's ritual of exorcism. Ellenberger tells the story of an Austrian priest named Johann Joseph Gassner, who performed miraculous healings across Europe. Gassner carefully distinguished the source of the person's malady, for he felt himself qualified only to treat demonic possession, not quotidian ill health. "In all of these cases," Ellenberger explains,

Gassner first told the patient that faith in the name of Jesus was an essential prerequisite to being healed and asked his consent for the use of *exorcismus probativus* (trial exorcism). He then solemnly entreated the demon to make manifest the symptoms of the disease; if the symptoms were produced, Gassner considered it proven that the disease was caused by the devil and proceeded to exorcise him. But if no symptoms appeared, he sent the patient to a doctor. In that manner he felt his position to be unimpeachable, both from the viewpoint of Catholic orthodoxy and from that of medicine. (55)

The great nineteenth-century American psychologist William James was also fascinated by the possible links between psychological experience and the supernatural. Whereas the priest Gassner sought to distinguish medicine and religion, James imagined that there might be a convergence between the work of the psychologist and that of a cleric. In an 1896 lecture at the Lowell Institute in Massachusetts, he suggested that "if there were real demons, they might possess only hysterics" (69).

Garry Wills adds a contemporary twist to this notion, by suggesting that "demons" might in fact seek out "hysterics." Wills maintains that rapacious priests targeted psychologically vulnerable boys, whom they sought to "heal" sexually. Indeed, Wills suggests that the religious setting may have been a catalyst rather than a deterrent to the priests' behavior: "It might be thought that churchly surroundings and sacred rites would discourage the priest's sexual aggression. They seem rather to have stimulated them, providing a frisson of the forbidden." In Wills's depiction, liturgical ritual, religious celebration, and holy icons are exploited as the occasion for what Freud euphemistically called "seduction." Psychoanalysis, in banishing at its inception the possibility that so many upstanding (if neurotic) Viennese individuals might have been molested in their bourgeois homes, sought to sideline questions of fact and focus on the "psychical reality" of fantasy, rather than forensic questions of crime and

proof. Following Wills, one can discern the opposite trajectory emerging from the scandal within the Catholic church. The flagrance of many of the crimes, and the cynicism of church leaders in covering up cases of abuse and harboring predatory priests, starts to make the transcendent elements of religion look like a cloak (or worse, a catalyst) for all too terrestrial crimes. William James's hope for a world in which the fantastic/religious and the scientific/psychological, or the fairy tale and the horror story, might coexist as meaningful forms for making sense of human experience, without one being subordinated to or propping up the other, comes to seem like a pipe dream indeed in the face of actions by clergy and church officials involved in these legal cases.

THE THERAPY, FANTASY, AND THE FAIRY TALE

As we've seen, the structure of *The Sixth Sense*—its fairy tale/horror film dichotomy coupled with the final “ah ha” moment of revelation—has striking analogies with the psychoanalytic writer Jeffrey M. Masson's controversial book *Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory*. Just as some within the bureaucracy of the Catholic church suppressed the truth of child abuse within its priestly ranks and ascribed victims' reports to overactive or malevolent imaginations, so Masson argued that Freud, in a moment of medical and moral treachery, treated his patients' tales of sexual abuse as telling fantasies rather than crime reports. The film makes it clear, moreover, that Freud's repudiation of his seduction theory is not just an arcane psychoanalytic concern. The hundred-year-old decision forms the conceptual foundation for those Philadelphia public school administrators who interpreted Cole's crayon drawings (corpses instead of rainbows) as the products of a disturbed mind.

What the movie reveals is that when Cole says he sees dead people, he means precisely that; and what makes *The Sixth Sense* a horror film is the introduction of both Malcolm and the viewer to the forensic truth of that statement. The etiology of Cole's trauma is traceable, finally, not only to a string of terrifying ghostly strangers but also to the therapist himself. Many readers of Freud's infamous “Dora” case come to a similar conclusion. Not only was the young woman whom Freud treated prostituted by her father and assaulted by a family friend; Dora was further abused at the hands of Freud himself, who identified with the rapacious men in her life and challenged the validity of her accusations. Perhaps they cut too close to home. The psychologist Douglas Davis has argued that Freud, after hearing so many patients recall sexual abuse at the hands of upstanding men like Freud (and Freud's father), just couldn't ascribe villainy to them. As Freud wrote to his confidant Wilhelm Fliess, “in

all cases the *father*—not excluding my own, had to be accused of being perverse” (quoted in Masson 108). As Davis notes, treating testimony as fantasy, in turn, supported “a theory that underscores the child’s, and blurs the adult’s, culpability.” Wills descries precisely this sort of reversal when he writes that a now-adult victim of Paul Shanley, because of his attempts to have the priest barred from contact with other children, is cast as “a ‘stalker’—a judgment Boston’s Cardinal Law seemed to support when he wrote him [Shanley] a letter expressing sympathy: ‘It must be very discouraging to have someone following you’” (quoted in Wills).

In *The Sixth Sense*, the young man named Vincent who shoots Malcolm right as the cheerful therapist is about to make love to his wife describes himself as “cursed.” How, then, are we to understand Malcolm’s treatment of Cole? I contend that *The Sixth Sense* takes neither a dogmatic Freudian line (casting children as seducers) nor repudiates the foundation of psychoanalysis (reinstating the fairy tale of preternatural child innocence and abject victimhood). Rather, Shyamalan steers a third course. The achievement of *The Sixth Sense* lies in its portrayal of an adult-child, doctor-patient relationship that succeeds in eluding an either/or framework in which relations between a priest-like figure and a soul in his care are utterly wholesome until they’re revealed as despicably corrupted. The lines of power and desire between Cole and Malcolm are not so clear cut, and the locus of violence and victimhood are infinitely more complex than the fairy tale-horror flick dichotomy would allow.

This complexity is signaled by key differences between Malcolm’s young patients. Unlike Vincent, who looks simultaneously adolescent and ancient, Cole is unmistakably a child, whom Malcolm finds playing with little plastic army men, moving them about, and speaking for them. Whereas the quivering Vincent was practically mute, Cole has his army men speaking in *Latin*, the official language of both the Catholic church and of medicine. (Indeed, books by Freud’s contemporaries, the Victorian “sexologists,” were often translated into Latin precisely to keep them out of the hands of laypeople in general, and children in particular.) This young patient, unlike Vincent, speaks the language of the two institutional authorities that converge on him in the church. Cole’s last name “Sear” suggests the painful, “searing” nature of his (as yet unknown) psychological wound—perhaps the missing father, whose glasses he wears. These elements, however, also alert us to the fact that the boy is a “seer,” a person with vision, one who perceives the truth beyond appearances.

The first doctor-patient conversation, viewed in light of the film’s ending, makes clear that Cole is actually putting the doctor on the spot,

eliciting information from him and scripting his future actions. Here is the dialogue that transpires between the adult and the child:

Malcolm: I like churches, too. In olden times, in Europe, people used to hide in churches. Claim sanctuary. [Cole looks up.]

Cole: What were they hiding from?

Malcolm: Oh, lots of things, I suppose. Bad people, for one. People who wanted to imprison them. Hurt them.

Cole: Nothing bad can happen in a church, right? [Malcolm studies Cole's anxious face.]

Malcolm: Right. [Malcolm and Cole just stare at each other.]

Cole, we later realize, is playing along with Malcolm's sense of their respective roles; the boy grants Malcolm his adulthood and his self-conception as a healer (and indeed a living person). In catechistic fashion, Cole also verifies that Malcolm is not a "horror." What looks like the child asking for adult wisdom—"Nothing bad can happen in a church, right?"—is in fact an assertion of the rules of the game, rules intrinsic not only to religious history but also to horror films (e.g., *The Omen* [1976]). Cole's query elicits Malcolm's echo of assent, "Right." The look that man and boy then exchange seals the bargain. Cole grants, and Malcolm agrees to take, the paternalistic adult role: the doctor affirms that he intends to help, to do "nothing bad"—and Cole's queries make him "right."

Malcolm has more to learn, however. When Cole first tells him, "I see dead people," a psychoanalytically minded Malcolm translates his assertion into this: "visual hallucinations, paranoia, symptoms of some kind of school age schizophrenia." Cole's mother Lynn also fumbles for a way to articulate her child's trouble, though she explicitly eschews the language of psychoanalysis and fantasy, insisting to the suspicious doctor in the hospital that, when Cole was locked in the garret, "Something was happening to him—physically happening. Something was very wrong." It is finally Vincent, the psychotic former patient, who provides the evidence that convinces Malcolm to stop interpreting Cole's symptoms as mere metaphors for psychic conflict. Malcolm replays a taped therapy session from over a decade ago with the painfully sensitive, (apparently) delusional Vincent. During the appointment Malcolm had briefly left the room, but had left the tape running; listening carefully again, with the volume pitched high, the psychoanalyst now discerns the ominous voice of a visitor speaking Spanish: "Mi familia . . . yo no quiero morir . . . Familia . . ." to which a shocked Malcolm mutters in recognition, "Jesus Christ."

In that session years before, Malcolm had assumed that the weeping Vincent had been unnerved by his momentary absence; the psychoanalyst

had then (unsuccessfully) tried to soothe his patient, and to get him to say what happened. Vincent had refused: "You won't believe," he had told Malcolm. Now, years later, Dr. Malcolm Crowe changes his mind—both of his patients had spoken the truth about what haunted them. For these ultrasensitive boys, entities that were always present but that "fly under the radar" of normal consciousnesses were palpable, visible: As the agitated Vincent had said to his therapist before shooting him, "Do you know why you're scared when you're alone? *I do.*" What had seemed like psychosis or an out-and-out lie—Cole's claim that he spoke with dead people—is now affirmed as fact. The tales these young men told might be horrific, almost impossible to believe, the stuff of horror movies or fairy tales, but they were *not* fantasies.

Malcolm is now faced with the novel dilemma of how actually to rid his overly receptive patient of the dead people who visit him. To do this, he turns once again to the central tools of psychoanalysis: the meticulous application of salient questions and patient listening to the elicited responses. Now, however, the doctor urges the *boy* to ask the ghosts what they want of him, and it turns out that each one suffers from desire for closure, for tying up some unfinished business in the world of the living. They want their story to have a proper ending, much as Cole, while in the hospital recovering from being locked up by the bully Tommy, coaches Malcolm to recast the lame bedtime story he was telling. Malcolm had observed that Cole, tiny and alone in a dim hospital room, was (according to the script directions) "wearing A MAN'S DRESS SOCK. The baggy folds ride up all the way to his knees." Seeking to lift the burden of adulthood from the boy's shoulders, Malcolm asks, "Your father ever tell you bedtime stories?" When Cole says, "Yes," his therapist commences: "Once upon a time there was a prince, who was being driven around . . . He drove around for a long, long time . . . Driving and driving . . . It was a long trip . . . He fell asleep . . . [beat] When he woke up, they were still driving . . . The long drive went on . . ."

At this point, Cole interjects, urging his doctor to skip the pointless narrative and "tell a story about why you're sad." The therapist, and the adult, in Malcolm resists: "I'm not supposed to talk about stuff like that." Cole just smiles and Malcolm tells his own story, in fairy-tale form: "Once upon a time there was this person named Malcolm. He worked with children. Loved it more than anything. [smiles] Then one night, he finds out he made a mistake with one of them." Once he drops the (very thin) veneer of unassailable adulthood authority and omniscience, and also drops the notion that children's stories must be the narrative equivalent of rainbows, Malcolm expresses his own fallibility and vulnerability.

In this moment of equalizing, Cole confides his secret to his therapist, that he sees dead people who “tell me stories.”

The critical theorist Cathy Caruth has written of trauma that “the literal threatening of bodily life . . . is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*” (62), that the mind has missed the actual external experience and therefore doesn’t know it fully. The idea that trauma inheres “precisely in the *missing* of this experience” (62) might be mustered to explain why the dead people who visit Cole Sear are not aware that they are dead, and why they suffer from a story cut off in the middle. Like the pointless prince in Malcolm’s story, they keep on going on and on and on.

So if *The Sixth Sense* at first seems to suggest that dead people, by actually existing, undermine the psychoanalytic account that would cast them as mere stories or the fictional projections of the boy’s psyche, it ends by suggesting that ghosts only exist insofar as they have a severed and unfinished connection with the living. With the help of Cole, who is transformed from a victim (or a patient) to a collaborator in the tales of others, the dead people are able to finish their own narratives and bring them to bear on the world. This enactment does not just have a healing influence on the lives of the living—protecting a sister, exposing a murderer—it also “heals” the ghost, who, in narrating and thereby recognizing the story of her own death, is now properly represented and no longer needs to appear. So instead of undermining the psychoanalytic account, *The Sixth Sense* radicalizes it. If a disrupted story might raise the



Cole gives advice to Malcolm

dead, setting the story straight might, as Freud found with his early patients and the cathartic cure, lay them to rest.

To complete the turning of tables, Cole offers advice to his own doctor, urging Malcolm to visit his estranged wife while she is sleeping, and whisper in her ear that he loves her. Returning home late, Malcolm murmurs his loving message and kisses her, then notices Anna has been holding his wedding ring. Confused and then stunned, he looks at his empty finger, clutches at his abdomen, and then staggers back against a wall, leaving behind a red streak. The exposed stomach wound, the blood on the wall: these veridical details—not just psychic wounds, but evidence of a crime—produce a visceral reaction. The character was actually shot in the gut; the viewer's experience is a homeopathic (but not merely metaphorical) stab of terror and recognition. Character and viewers realize at the same moment that, ever since the first scene when he was shot by his former patient, the doctor was himself dead. A series of flashbacks serve as a reminder that only Malcolm's current patient, the one who sees dead people, ever acknowledged the therapist's presence.

The Sixth Sense, in other words, does not simply repeal the psychoanalytic story, as Jeffrey M. Masson's self-aggrandizing and (as Janet Malcolm persuasively shows) ultimately narcissistic escapades at the Freud Archives threatened to do. Instead, it focuses attention onto the analyst, by suggesting that the doctor's unresolved trauma gave him what existence he had. Stuck in the ontological purgatory of his traumatic death at the hands of his earlier patient, Malcolm equips Cole with the technique to cure himself—and thus to rewrite the story of Malcolm's failed treatment of the other boy. A fairy tale, perhaps, but a deeply efficacious one. There's a different story to be told, of course, one that falls into the horror genre. Ruth Leys, writing of Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, has argued it comprises "the belief that the trauma experienced by one person can be passed on to others" (284). In haunting the boy, Malcolm indeed could be said to succeed, in Caruth's terms, not in *representing*, but in "transmit[ing] intergenerationally" (284) his psychic wounds. This idea of repetition is central to the cultural narrative of pedophilia. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have termed this transmission "transgenerational haunting," in which "the shameful silence of several generations" are expressed in "the symptoms of a descendant" (22). Wills notes that the convicted priest Shanley spoke of being molested himself, though Wills is also quick to note that the intergeneration passing along of such crimes is not always just a psychological issue, but also an institutional (and indeed, a criminal) one. Quoting a letter from Shanley to an archdiocesan administrator, Wills speculates that the rapacious priest's confession was

less a plea for help than a threat to ensure the church's protection: "I have abided by my promise not to mention to anyone the fact that I too had been sexually abused as a teenager, and later as a seminarian by a priest, a faculty member, a pastor and ironically by the predecessor of one of the two Cardinals who now debates my fate."

The Sixth Sense portrays a different outcome. Yes, Malcolm haunts Cole . . . but he also equips him with a technique for managing the ghosts who visit him, transforming the boy into a sort of therapist to the dead. Malcolm certainly projects his own desires onto Cole as he attempts to rewrite his earlier failure with Vincent, but it is Cole himself, finally, who helps the analyst to work through his misguided treatment of the earlier boy and succeeds in ushering Malcolm out of his traumatic purgatory. Fairy tale and thriller converge in Malcolm's final scene where, at the urging of Cole, the physician murmurs words of love into the ear of his sleeping wife. In a striking reworking of the magic fairy-tale kiss that awakens the sleeping princess, the scene simultaneously kisses the *doctor* awake—he realizes he is dead—and kisses him off.

Bruno Bettelheim argues that fairy tales condense the terrors as well as the joys and surprises of human existence into a manageable and indeed life-affirming form. He differentiates the fairy tale from myth, which he argues makes demands; myth challenges a child to step into the shoes of Oedipus and experience the unredeemed horror of mother-loving and father-killing. Cultural myths also perpetuate unlivable notions of child purity, adult unassailability, and institutional benevolence—myths whose inevitable collapse, in a dreadful moment of "ah ha!" in turn propel equally untenable notions of child malevolence, adult victimhood, and the cynical disenchantment with institutions (e.g., psychoanalysis, the Catholic church) that, at their best, might be recognized for at least *aspiring* to offer solace to suffering souls.

Fairy tales, Bettelheim argues, are different. "And they lived happily ever after," he writes,

does not for a moment fool the child that eternal life is possible. But it does indicate that which alone can take the sting out of the narrow limits of our time on this earth: forming a truly satisfying bond to another. The tales teach that when one has done this, one has reached the ultimate in emotional security of existence and permanence of relation available to man; and this alone can dissipate fear of death. If one has found true adult love, the fairy story also tells, one doesn't need to wish for eternal life. This is suggested by another ending found in fairy tales: "They lived for a long time afterward, happy and in pleasure." (10–11)

A child learns from fairy stories to believe, Bettelheim writes, in the possibility of human connection, that “what at first seemed a repulsive, threatening figure can magically change into a most helpful friend” (50). Such tales help to give form to more quotidian, less fantastic beliefs—that, for instance, “a strange child whom he meets and fears may also be changed from a menace into a desirable companion” (50). (Think of the bully Tommy, who by film’s end literally takes the role of the village idiot and must look on as Cole, cast as a young King Arthur in the school play, triumphantly pulls the sword from the stone.) In Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense*, it is finally Bruce Willis’s character who gives immaculate form to Bettelheim’s insights. He helps Cole to see how he could produce a livable future by collaborating with the ghosts who haunt him—including the scariest ghost of all, the analyst himself.

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NOTES

1. For a Lacanian reading of the film in which Cole's (Haley Joel Osment) "lack of a father figure" leaves him in a "traumatised state of fear and uncertainty . . . personified in the form of the ghosts," see Houtman. Similarly, Rickels casts the ghosts as fantasy: "Cole accepts that he sees, wishes people Dad or dead and, in listening to Malcolm, the Dad transference or ghost, he gets the rise out of the unconscious that places him in a position to clear away the pathogenic force of his missing or aiming against the Dad." See also Fowkes.
2. See, for instance, Sulloway (111–31). In *An Autobiographical Study*, Freud himself credited his repudiation of the seduction theory with paving the way for psychoanalysis proper: "I had in fact stumbled for the first time upon the Oedipus complex, which was later to assume such an overwhelming importance, but which I did not recognize as yet in its disguise of fantasy" (qtd. in Malcolm, 18).
3. Shyamalan made this comment on *The Daily Show* with John Stewart on July 18, 2006.
4. We might note the author of *In the Freud Archives*, Janet Malcolm, wrote such a probing and unflattering analysis of Jeffrey M. Masson's adventures in the archives that he subsequently took her to court for her portrayal. (Masson ultimately lost the suit.) To invoke Freud himself, from *Studies on Hysteria*, "It is difficult to attribute too much sense . . . to these details" (93).

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UNBREAK MY HEART

THE MELODRAMATIC SUPERHERO IN *UNBREAKABLE*

MATT YOCKEY

IN *UNBREAKABLE* (2000), M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN EMPLOYS MELODRAMATIC elements in order to emphasize a crisis in patriarchy that is a key thematic of classic melodramas. His use of these tropes to tell a story of a man, David Dunn (Bruce Willis), who learns he is a superhero foregrounds the commonalities between superhero narratives and melodramas. Most significantly, the superhero genre's excessive expression of moral certainty indicates hysterical overcompensation, an extreme response to crises directly addressed in melodrama. Peter Brooks writes that melodramatic form is distinguished by a tendency "toward intense, excessive representations of life which strip the façade of manners to reveal . . . the domain of operative spiritual values" (5). This domain is what Brooks calls "the moral occult," the realm of the unconscious mind in which primary desires and repressions reside and that appears to be wholly removed from everyday existence. According to Brooks, it becomes the primary goal of the protagonist in melodrama to locate "meaning and value" (5) by going beyond the conscious everyday and accessing the moral occult.

Melodrama's concern with "intense inner drama in which consciousness must purge itself and assume the burden of moral sainthood" is also evident in the superhero genre, which is primarily concerned with the physical and attendant moral transformation of the protagonist. *Unbreakable* utilizes conventions of the superhero genre to apparently resolve ideological crises in patriarchy evident in melodrama. By synthesizing the two genres, Shyamalan's film acknowledges the implicit crisis in patriarchy that informs most superhero texts by recognizing the presence

and significance of a wife and two mothers within this narrative universe. However, the melodramatic problem produced through the introduction of female characters allows for all blame to be assigned to femininity. This ideological work is achieved by foregrounding the point of view of the male child, establishing a viewer position that, in its function of marginalizing the feminine, indicates that the problems of patriarchy are never fully alleviated. The presence of the superhero is constant evidence of both the social and ideological necessity of the very problem, the feminine, which this figure is meant to resist and contain.

The protagonist in both the melodrama and the superhero genres often begins the narrative paralyzed either by an excess or lack of emotionalism and ends it as an active agent with a clear moral vision and purpose buoyed by regulation of emotions. In melodrama, the contention between protagonist and regulatory patriarchy is typically worked out around the family, and the domestic sphere becomes the privileged domain in which resistance and eventual capitulation to appropriate patriarchal authority is exercised. For example, Vincente Minnelli's prototypical melodrama *Home from the Hill* (1960) depicts a domestic crisis centered on a repressive, philandering father and his contentious relationship with his sons, one the unacknowledged result of an affair. Though the film gestures toward a critique of patriarchy in its negative portrayal of the father, patriarchy is recuperated via the redemption of the sons. Their legitimacy as heirs is witnessed and validated by the central maternal figure, indicating the necessity of the feminine as a socializing agent. The problems of patriarchy remain exposed but, through that exposure, these problems are also apparently resolved.

Melodramas rely on both male and female protagonists to address concerns about patriarchy. The superhero genre's ritual affirmation of patriarchal power typically allows women little agency in this process. Women usually exist primarily to legitimate the male superhero's assumption of patriarchal power, not to question or problematize it. *Unbreakable* is significant in that it resolves the perpetual crisis in patriarchy articulated in melodrama and frequently mediated by a female character by conjoining it with and privileging the superhero genre. In foregrounding the domestic strife of the Dunn family, the film prominently concerns itself with a crisis in patriarchy at the expense of the conventional dilemma of the superhero genre, which is the competing masculine agency of the supervillain. The principal threat to the patriarch in *Unbreakable* is not the supervillain but the primary female character, the wife and mother (Audrey, played by Robin Wright Penn). In fact, the supervillain is a facilitator of patriarchal domination, even at his own expense, whereas the

woman opposes and attempts to thwart this domination. In the end, the supervillain Elijah (Samuel L. Jackson) performs the work of the woman in melodrama; his challenge to patriarchal authority allows for narrative closure in which the threat is expelled and authority reinforced.

In fact, patriarchy's primacy within the domestic sphere is validated in *Unbreakable* by virtue of the fact that the hero is strongly configured as the head of the nuclear family, while the supervillain is regarded as a man retarded in his masculine development. He lives in a child's world, unable to access the masculine agency seen as rightfully belonging to the hero. Through the figure of the supervillain, the film questions the validity of domestic ideologies and, in this way, is consistent with melodrama. However, where melodramatic texts will often interrogate these ideologies from a female perspective, *Unbreakable* does so from an exclusively male one. Domesticity and the family is not an articulation of patriarchal repression of the woman, as is often seen in melodrama; rather, it is the site of female repression of patriarchy.

The superhero genre traditionally rejects domesticity as an option for the hero, thereby affirming the essential threat it poses to masculine agency. *Unbreakable* confronts this threat directly by layering melodramatic elements onto a superhero transformation narrative. While *Unbreakable* seems to recognize the legitimacy of domesticity within the superhero genre, it is in fact more persuasively disavowing it. While the nuclear family is reconstituted at the end of the film, this reconstitution is secondary to the reaffirmation of patriarchal power, conveyed by the bond shared by father and son. The superhero identity is a secret loaded with significance for those who share it. As in melodrama, this secret (which is central to the superhero genre) exists as an ever-present challenge and threat to the domestic sphere. However, the secret in the melodramatic text is only threatening when it is the woman who bears it, and it is often knowledge that in some way threatens the integrity of the family. The secret is therefore a threat to the family as a defining domain of patriarchal authority. By inserting the superhero convention of the secret identity shared by figurative fathers and sons (as seen in the numerous adolescent male side-kicks who accompany adult male heroes) within a melodramatic context, the secret becomes an articulation of domesticity as the seat of patriarchal power that marginalizes the woman.

FAMILY (SUPER)MAN

Unbreakable is centrally concerned with the break up of the marriage of David and Audrey Dunn and the effect this has on their son, Joseph (Spenser Treat Clark). In fact, Joseph's relationship to his father is

privileged over the relationship between husband and wife, affirming that patriarchal authority and continuity is what is primarily at stake here. Amid this domestic strife comes Elijah Price, a comic book art dealer who suffers from a rare disorder that makes his bones extremely fragile. After learning that David is the lone survivor of a train wreck, Elijah asserts that David is in effect invincible, a real-life superhero. Elijah explains and justifies his theories by referencing the superhero comic books he has grown up reading. David and Audrey reject Elijah as mentally ill, but Joseph sincerely believes his theory. Eventually, David comes to accept that he has the powers of precognition through physical contact and near-invulnerability and assumes superheroic responsibilities, rescuing a family from a home invasion. Parallel to his dawning of his abilities, David and Audrey reconcile. At the end of the film, Elijah reveals that in order to give his life meaning, he has resorted to criminal acts to discover the existence of a superhero. He reveals that, in staging accidents to discover a lone survivor, he has killed hundreds of people. Elijah is committed to an institution for the criminally insane and, presumably, David continues his superhero career.

With its angst-ridden narrative focus on the dysfunctional nuclear family, the film positions itself clearly as a melodramatic text. Yet the presence of the superhero hovers at the periphery of these issues throughout the film and apparently asserts control of the text at the end. The film favors the superhero genre by constructing the ideal reader of the hybrid text as the son of the patriarch. The film locates the family amid a crisis in patriarchal authority and seemingly defuses this crisis by validating the governing ideology of the superhero genre, in which patriarchy is resolute and impervious. However, as with melodramas, complete recuperation is never achieved because the feminine threat is ever present. The presence of the superhero always indicates his necessity (there is always crime to fight); in the domestic context of *Unbreakable*, David must remain a superhero because he must always confront the challenges to patriarchy posed by the feminine. This inherent conflict between rugged individualism and social norms is mediated via the figure of the child, who represents the future of the nuclear family as well as the masculine values embodied by the superhero father. The film articulates this on the narrative level by situating Joseph as the mediator between his estranged parents. In the first scene in which we see the family together, Joseph is the central figure who literally unites his parents. Audrey and Joseph greet David as he emerges from the hospital emergency room following the train accident. Joseph rushes up to his father and embraces him. Audrey approaches slowly and husband and wife stiffly embrace. Joseph places his

father's hand in his mother's, but as they walk down the hall, following Joseph, they slip out of each other's grasp.

This scene introduces the melodramatic component of the film—the fractured Dunn marriage—and indicates the son's desire for the restoration of the family. For Joseph, the reconstitution of the family, expressed through the reintegration of the father into the domestic sphere, is of utmost importance. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that the reestablishment of patriarchal authority is the legitimate need of society in general. This necessity is expressed via the figure of the superhero by the primary character who articulates that need, Elijah. Guided by the insight of Elijah, the comic book reader who recognizes in David a familiar figure of redemption, Joseph identifies the deeper moral truth hidden beneath the conflict between his parents: that the father must necessarily assume the responsibilities of patriarchy, which are determined by physical agency in the expression of moral authority. It is the son of the patriarch, who, through privileged access to the moral occult, resolves the melodramatic crisis. In this dynamic, the father gains access to the moral occult and asserts patriarchal authority.

Importantly, while Audrey and Joseph defer to this authority, so too does the film's villain, Elijah. All the characters gain some degree of legitimacy through their relationship to patriarchal authority, even if that relationship marks them as deviant and in opposition to patriarchy. By doing so, the film reasserts the primacy of patriarchal authority in a world it regards as sorely needing it. Therefore, the ability of characters to recognize the moral authority of David is a central conceit of the film, one that divides characters along lines of gender and race, as white men are placed in positions of power while women and African Americans are marginalized. Audrey is primarily passive; as the teenager who simultaneously marvels at and cringes from David's high school football heroics, she is marked by her judgmental gaze. Her one act of agency in the film is to forbid both father and son to play football. The female gaze is a disciplining one, but, in that disciplining, it is revealed to be fallible; Audrey cannot recognize the superheroic qualities of her husband. Indeed, by virtue of the superhero genre's gender politics, this inability to recognize the truth about David is necessary. Similarly, Elijah primarily watches but, because he has access to the moral truth offered by comic books, he recognizes David for what he truly is. Elijah's access to this domain, however, is severely restricted. Because of his physical condition, he is placed in a more passive, feminized position. When he does express agency, it is strongly informed by the disciplining gaze of his mother. In a flashback sequence we see Elijah's mother compel him to leave the house in order to

get a comic book she has left on a park bench. It is the mother who uses Elijah's interest in comics to engage him with the world.

Because he physically lacks the ability to assume patriarchal authority, and, implicitly, because he lacked the governing hand of a father growing up, Elijah remains a boy throughout his life—the emotionally stunted and physically disabled man who sees the world through the lens of superhero comics but can never realize or identify with the masculine agency in the superhero narrative. His engagement with the world is therefore a distorted and illegitimate one. Consistent with the superhero genre, Elijah's fragile body is a manifestation of an innate moral weakness. This deviancy is marked by his physical appearance; Elijah favors purple suits, black leather gloves, and a glass cane. His eccentric look signifies his distorted connection to the moral occult. He *sees* it in the world around him but is not part of it. David's appearance, on the other hand, indicates his integration into society and access to the moral occult, as he dons his work clothes, a raincoat marked "Security," when he becomes a superhero. Importantly, David finally sees the truth about Elijah only after he recognizes the truth about himself. When David shakes Elijah's hand for the first time, his crimes are revealed to him. This ability to *see* becomes an important narrative conceit and visual metaphor throughout the film, and Shyamalan takes great pains to foreground the role of seeing and *reading* in relationship to patriarchal power. By doing so, Shyamalan employs self-reflexivity to address the idea of seeing and reading on the extradiegetic level. This strategy addresses the complicated role of the reader in regards to the superhero text, and Shyamalan's deployment of melodramatic conventions amplifies those complications.

OF WOMEN'S FILMS AND FANBOYS: THE ROLE OF THE READER IN *UNBREAKABLE*

Before the viewer sees any characters or hears a single line of dialogue, Shyamalan presents him with the following statistics on screen: "There are 35 pages and 124 illustrations in the average comic book. A single issue ranges in price from \$1.00 to over \$140,000. 172,000 comics are sold in the U.S. every day. Over 62,780,000 each year. The average comic collector owns 3,312 comics and will spend approximately 1 year of his or her life reading them." This careful dissection of comic book form is matched by an equally exact interest in comic book readers, indicating that details about comic book readers are as important as the comic books themselves. This is, in fact, a film about reading and the privileged access to knowledge that a reader has. How the film articulates the viewer as a reader of its own texts becomes an important function of the film.

In elaborating on this governing conceit of reading, the film affirms the ideal reader as childlike and, by doing so, foregrounds its hybrid status as both a melodrama and a superhero film. The film makes clear distinctions between those who read the world correctly and have access to moral truths and those who do not. In this way it conflates conventions of melodrama with those of the superhero genre in order to privilege the reading position of the child. The viewer, by extension, is placed in the position of the child. That is to say, the film constructs the ideal reader of its hybridized text as the child, in the process affirming patriarchal authority that is resolute in the superhero genre but problematic and uncertain in melodrama.

One of the characteristics of the melodrama is that its interest in familial, domestic, and romantic issues has traditionally been regarded as appealing to female viewers in ways that other genres do not. Hollywood melodrama traditionally has been regarded as a genre that often privileges a female subjectivity and the supposed interests of female viewers. Storylines often deal with role of female protagonists in relationship to the dissolution and restoration of the romantic love, the family, or both. As Christine Geraghty notes, however, these films do not simply speak to the presumed needs of female viewers, but satisfy “an allegedly self-indulgent desire to move away from reality and to retreat into another world created by the fiction” (102). In this regard, melodrama shares much with the superhero genre: both have been considered as escapist fare meant to appeal to a heavily gendered audience. What distinguishes them, apart from gender designations, is the age of the perceived typical audience member. Melodramas are conventionally regarded as adult entertainment and superhero narratives as children’s fare. It is my contention that *Unbreakable* relies on a longstanding assumption that the audience for superhero stories is composed of children, thereby framing its melodramatic discourse within the subjectivity of its primary child character.

The popular construction of superhero fans as predominantly male (reinforced by such appellations as “fanboys”) obscures the fact that historically comic book readers have tended to be boys and girls. According to a survey conducted in 1943, “95 percent of all children ages eight to eleven read comic books regularly, as did 84 percent of those from twelve to seventeen years old. Readership declined in the eighteen-to-thirty age group” (Pustz 27). Superhero comics in particular appeal to children because, according to Matthew J. Pustz, it is easy for “mild-mannered boys and girls reading . . . *Superman* to imagine that their calm, everyday existence was merely a lie hiding a heroic, adventurous, powerful interior” (27). The superhero is not only the ideal father figure (evidenced by the

Batman and Robin relationship in which no women are evident), he is also a stand-in for the child, the ideal adult whose is appealing not only because he has superpowers but also because he *plays* (wears a colorful costume, has a secret hideout) in a world in which no disciplining maternal gaze is evident. The superhero gets to be parent and child at once, the former role pacifying the implicit threat of the latter and vice versa.

Superhero narratives as escapist fare indicate another way in which this genre overlaps with concerns of melodrama. According to Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, melodrama “enacts . . . the imaginary scenario played out by children in relation to their paternity, the asking and the answering of the question: whose child am I (or would I like to be)?” (73). This question is posed in the superhero genre in order to substantiate patriarchy; in melodrama it is asked in order to critique it and allow it a qualified legitimacy, as seen in *Home from the Hill* (1960). Melodrama articulates threats to patriarchy in order to reassert its value, often in relation to children (i.e., the necessity of the father to provide for his children).

The problem for women in melodrama is that of domesticity and often the child is at the heart of the marital predicament, a passive subject whose fate is at stake in the patriarchal crisis at the center of the narrative. This is evident in one of the most canonical Hollywood melodramas, *Stella Dallas* (1937). In the film, Stella’s climb up the social ladder at the expense of the love of her stalwart and long-suffering husband is aborted for the sake of her daughter. In fact, such a sacrifice redeems the woman who has transgressed social boundaries and asserts the primacy of the patriarch. The wedding that Stella watches from outside the church includes her former husband, who looks on approvingly as his daughter happily submits to the dictates of patriarchal society.

The child holds a complex and compelling position as a subject of identification within the melodramatic text, a position reflected in the superhero text. The assumptions about gendered viewership that attend each genre can and should be complicated. Aldo J. Regalado observes that in *Unbreakable*, “the truth about superheroes . . . depends upon and emerges from the interaction of multiple perspectives and the cultural or even psychological responses these interactions elicit” (119). By marrying conventions of the melodrama to the superhero genre, *Unbreakable* navigates the complex interrelationship between male and female viewer subjectivity. The film resolves the tension between these perspectives by foregrounding a third viewer position, which is also present in the melodramatic text, that of the male child. The film endorses a popular construction of the reader of superhero texts as a boy, figuring both the villain and Joseph as primary mediators of the melodramatic text. In this way,

the child is the ideal reader of both the melodrama and superhero texts because an understanding of the latter helps resolve the domestic issues of the former.

Steve Neale notes that in cinema because identification is inherently fluid and mobile, “there is constant work to channel and regulate identification . . . in relation to the orders of gender, sexuality, and social identity and authority marking patriarchal society” (11). Neale sees two types of looking as instrumental to the disciplining of the viewer’s gaze: voyeuristic looking and fetishistic looking. The former mode emphasizes the distance between viewer and object viewed, allowing the viewer a degree of control over the object of his or her gaze. This mode is diegetically apparent in the way in which Joseph looks at his father, particularly in the scene in which he continually adds more weight for David to bench press. Joseph is awed by the spectacle of his father’s increasingly apparent superheroic abilities and his subjectivity is meant to reflect the viewer’s extradiegetic experience of looking at David. This mode of gazing confirms the subject’s distance from us, as well as our investment in the spectacle and its ideological underpinnings. As David transforms through the course of the film into a pure superhero, Joseph’s (and our) voyeuristic gaze becomes fetishistic, which is less interrogative than voyeuristic looking, more satisfied with affectively consuming spectacle. This is apparent on the extradiegetic level in the scene in which David battles the home invader. This scene marks his fruition as a superhero, and the viewer is meant uncritically to enjoy the spectacle of ritual combat central to the superhero genre. In this way, the film compensates for the melodramatic interrogation of patriarchal power that has come before, assuring the viewer that ideal masculinity will prevail. Fetishistic viewing is underscored in the following scene in which Joseph sees the newspaper illustration of his father. The father has fully entered the ideologically secure realm of fetishistic looking, as he is transformed into a figurative object, meant only to be looked at as confirmation of patriarchal hegemony.

Importantly, this subjectivity belongs to the son of the heroic father in *Unbreakable*, thereby legitimating white patriarchal authority and invalidating both the woman (in this case, both Audrey and Elijah’s mother [Charlayne Woodard]) and the nonwhite man-child [Elijah]). It is the child who has privileged access to moral truths in the film, but it is the responsibility of the father to act on those truths. Agency remains within white patriarchy; other attempts at agency are regarded as distorted and inauthentic or are condoned and regulated by patriarchy. So long as patriarchal authority is deferred to, the family can be saved. By affirming

governing ideologies of the superhero genre, the film presents a solution to its melodramatic problem: the disintegration of the Dunn family.

In fact, this family crisis is merely a substitute for a larger crisis: a world in which its masculine saviors have been absented by an authorizing female gaze. As a young man, David was a football star. Audrey, however, disapproved of this, and David feigned being injured in an automobile accident in order to stop playing. In investigating David's life, Elijah asks Audrey about her relationship with David. She tells him, "I couldn't spend my life with someone who played football . . . Football, in many ways, is the opposite of what I do. You're rewarded the more you punish your opponent. It's too much about violence and I don't want violence in my life. It's not a thing many people can understand." David's entry into full patriarchal power, then, comes with conditions imposed by Audrey. This challenge to patriarchal authority is complicated by the fact that it compels David to lie to Audrey. In the process of deceiving her about the car accident, he deceives Joseph and himself about his masculine agency. David's eventual transformation into a superhero by the film's end is strongly characterized by the perpetuation of a larger lie to Audrey—David must keep from Audrey that he is a superhero for whom violence is an essential part of life. This becomes a secret that David and Joseph share, thereby augmenting the restoration of the family. In order for the family to be redeemed, David must resist the illegitimate (i.e., female). He must recognize his capabilities and responsibilities and share that knowledge with his son, who believes in the true nature of his father even before David does. Continuity between father and son is the primary function of the family in this respect, and the woman is merely a necessary instrument in the perpetuation of patriarchal power and in fact can be an impediment to it. By covertly resisting maternal authority, David and Joseph Dunn reaffirm patriarchal authority while maintaining familial harmony.

The melodramatic secret that threatens the family is, as per the superhero genre in general, a secret that bonds father and son. Significantly, David must appropriate a child-like perspective and marry it to a governing adult sensibility in order to become the ideal patriarchal force, the superhero. The film privileges the subjectivity of the child and affirms that for David to reassert his patriarchal authority he must reconnect with this subjectivity, as it is a subjectivity not yet pacified by the disciplining female. The film conveys the importance of the child's subjectivity explicitly via its *mise en scène*, most pointedly through a series of upside-down point of view shots. These shots are a visual motif that indicates the complex and shifting relationship between David, his son, and Elijah.

The importance of these shots is to indicate that in order to see the world as it should be (that is, with patriarchy restored), one must first assume a child's subjectivity in which the world is literally turned upside down. This skewed perspective in fact indicates the legitimate access that the child (inflected both in melodrama and the superhero genre as an innocent and, therefore, more reliable witness to the world) has to the moral occult. It is a rejection of a maternal authority that explicitly denies the legitimacy of patriarchal authority.

In the opening scene of the film, the viewer is introduced to David as he sits on a commuter train. He looks passively and forlornly out his window as the train slowly moves through a station. The camera follows him as he shifts in his seat. He glances at the seat in front of him, and Shyamalan cuts to a point of view shot of a little girl (Samantha Savino) sitting on her head in the seat. Shyamalan cuts back to the previous shot of David; however, now he is smiling at the girl and tilts his head slightly to approximate her position. He holds this position only momentarily, however. His smile drops and he falls back against the window, looking tired and unhappy. After David unsuccessfully tries to pick up an attractive young woman who sits beside him (Leslie Stefanson), he places his wedding ring, which he had removed when the woman sat down, back on his finger. He glances back at the little girl, and Shyamalan cuts to a point of view shot of her. She is no longer sitting on her head but is sitting upright and looking at David impassively, a mute witness to his attempted infidelity.

The use of point of view shots in this scene places the viewer within David's subjectivity, affirming that we are meant to identify with him. By doing so, however, it also implicates the viewer in David's compromised ethics. Significantly, the film establishes a child as the moralizing force, the innocent who, through his or her privileged gaze (indicated visually in the film by the upside-down point of view shot), has direct access to the moral occult. David's failed attempt to duplicate this gaze indicates that his primary challenge in the film is to accept a childlike view of reality, so that he can recognize the fantastic that lies beneath. Within the realm of the fantastic lies moral truth and the recognition of patriarchal authority. The little girl on the train anticipates and establishes the function that Joseph and, in different ways, Elijah will serve in the film.

When Shyamalan introduces David, he employs the upside-down point of view shot again. In the scene that follows the introduction of David on the train, the viewer sees Joseph watching television laying upside down on a couch in his family's living room. Shyamalan cuts to a series of shots in which we see the television from Joseph's point of view. He channel

surfs from a melodramatic realist text (*The Jerry Springer Show*) to a superhero cartoon (*The Powerpuff Girls*), to, finally, a news bulletin about a train crash. Joseph, suddenly interested, sits upright and quickly realizes that his father is on the train, which has derailed. The upside-down position is again associated with a child and with access to knowledge. In this case, it is knowledge of a train wreck that will inspire Joseph (via Elijah) to believe in his father's superhero abilities. Joseph's gaze is privileged because he is the only member of the Dunn family who recognizes his father's special status. In fact, Joseph's relationship to his father depends on his ability to recognize in his father something David (in accordance to the wishes of Audrey) refuses to see: that he is a superhero. In a later scene Joseph attempts to engage his father in a game of football. David refuses, saying, "Joseph, do you know how mad your mother would be if she knew you were playing football?" The absent woman's authority is asserted by David, a further confirmation of his own masculine disenfranchisement and his inability to understand that, according to the ideology of the film, in order for the family to be saved, the father must first save his own masculinity. The son plays the pivotal role of reminding the father of who he once was and what he can, and should, be.

Joseph's response to his father's refusal to play football is to confront him with his own neglected abilities. He surreptitiously adds to David's weights when he bench presses in the next scene. This leads to the two testing the limits of David's weightlifting abilities. This scene is the first moment in which Audrey's authority is challenged by David, as inspired by Joseph. It is his first step toward completely resisting her authority and asserting his true masculine agency. David's newfound perspective is indicated by the use of an upside-down point of view shot. Shyamalan shoots David bench pressing a tremendous amount of weight, and David asks Joseph, "How much did you put on that time?" Shyamalan cuts to a shot of Joseph looking down at his dad, from David's point of view, so that he is upside down. Joseph replies, "All of it." It is a revelatory moment in the narrative, the point at which a central barrier between father and son is dissolved. David now begins to see himself the way his son does. By adopting the perspective of his son, as indicated by the upside-down shot, David is taking the first step toward reclaiming patriarchal authority, saving his disintegrating family, and becoming a superhero.

Because Elijah is the man-child who lacks any credible access to patriarchal authority, he is also distinguished by upside-down point of view shots. The first one that Shyamalan provides is in the flashback sequence in which a young Elijah reads the comic book on the park bench. As Elijah opens the box containing the comic, Shyamalan cuts to a bird's-eye

view in which we effectively see the comic from Elijah's perspective: upside down. As Elijah rotates the comic in order to look at it right side up, Shyamalan rotates the camera 360 degrees, keeping it in an upside-down perspective for the majority of the shot. This visual flourish indicates Elijah's subjectivity as a child while emphasizing the distorted way in which he actualizes his understanding of the world. This is an important transitional moment in the character's development, for the comic book cover indicates the childlike way in which Elijah, as an adult, sees the world. In the next scene, the viewer sees Elijah discussing the original art for the comic book cover with a customer at his gallery.¹ He states, "It's a classic depiction of good vs. evil. Notice the square jaw of Slayer, common in most comic heroes. And the slightly disproportionate size of Jaguaro's head to his body. This again is common, but only in villains."² These physical characteristics, the classically handsome hero and physically deformed villain, are reflected in *Unbreakable*. This emphasizes that Elijah perceives the world in comic book terms—that the comic books his mother gave him as a child give it meaning. As a child who suffers from a rare disorder that makes his bones extremely fragile, Elijah relies on comic books to make an otherwise hostile world navigable.³

However, as noted, Elijah's perspective, per generic convention, is distorted. This distortion is emphasized by another visual motif Shyamalan uses in relation to Elijah—that of the reflected image. This is first employed in the opening sequence of Elijah's birth. This scene, set in a department store, is almost entirely seen in the reflection of the store's mirrors. This establishes the essential barrier between Elijah and the rest of the world—a world he sees literally and figuratively in reverse. It also further associates him with glass, the character's fragile physical and emotional self reiterated in the film's *mise en scène*.⁴ This motif is employed later in the scene in which the young Elijah is reflected in the screen of the television he glumly sits in front of ("They call me Mr. Glass at school"). Shyamalan uses it again a short time later when he dissolves from the comic book cover in Elijah's lap to the original art in his gallery. As he discusses the meaning of the art with his customer (Bob Bowersox), the viewer sees Elijah reflected in the glass of the display case. The man has become lost in the world of comic books, his image but an immaterial reflection of the images he looks upon adoringly in their display cases. He is literally and figuratively reflected in them.

MALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE

The motif of seeing in this film is about knowledge—knowledge of oneself and others. It is about a moral clarity and perceptiveness. Elijah sees

the forces of good and evil in the world around him and “recognizes” his place on the side of evil. This decision that he makes to oppose patriarchal authority, and that is so strongly informed by the comic books he reads, speaks to his inability to assume masculine responsibilities. His unwillingness to assume agency and responsibility, rather than any innate moral nature, is what distinguishes Elijah from David. Elijah lives too much according to the logic of comic books. Rather than using their rhetoric as a touchstone to understanding the world, he sees them as constituting the world. He remains stuck in the passive position of the child. Even when his vision assists David in understanding his place in the world as a superhero, it solidifies Elijah’s position as the man-child. After being vehemently rebuked by David, who tells Elijah he was nearly drowned as a child (“Heroes don’t get killed like that”), Elijah retreats to the one place he can relocate meaning in the world, a comic book store. It is here where he sees a comic book cover that reveals to him the truth about David: water is his one weakness. Shyamalan emphasizes the point by once again providing an upside-down point of view shot when Elijah sees the revelatory comic book.⁵

David also endows the world with meaning by reading, though this is marked in very different ways from Elijah’s childish perspective. Instead of comic books, David reads the newspaper. These two disparate media, comic books and newspapers, indicate the fundamentally different ways each man reads his world (one as an adult, the other as a child). David’s reading of the newspaper, however, initially serves to affirm his own distorted vision of the world, for he pours over clippings of his days as a football star (reminders of his masculine agency), as well as the automobile accident in which he feigned a career-ending injury (endorsing the illegitimate female gaze). Finally, the film suggests that the ideal reading position is not entirely that of the adult or the child, but a combination of the two. This speaks to the film’s marriage of an “adult” genre, the melodrama, to a “children’s” genre, the superhero. By the end of the film, David has accessed the realm of the moral occult by adopting a child’s perspective and combined it with an active patriarchal agency, thus becoming a superhero. This amalgamation of the adult and child is reflected in reading material, in this case the newspaper (adult medium) that affirms David’s superheroic agency (“Hero’ Rescues Two Children”). Significantly, Elijah keeps newspaper clippings of his criminal acts, reported as accidents, indicating his desire to confer meaning onto his life. The presence of the newspaper clippings in Elijah’s office, coupled with David’s revelatory vision when he grasps Elijah’s hand, indicates David’s privileged gaze within the adult world.

This legitimate affirmation of the return of the patriarch reflects David's complete return to the patriarchal role within the family. In this final scene of the Dunn family together, Joseph comes downstairs to see his parents affectionately sitting at the kitchen table over breakfast. As Joseph takes a seat at the table, David surreptitiously reveals to him the newspaper story about his adventure the night before (complete with pencil drawing of David in "costume"), literally behind Audrey's back. The restoration of the nuclear family, that primary vehicle by which patriarchy is legitimated, is reflected in the restoration of the heroic male rescuer within society at large. According to the rhetoric of the film, the two roles are inseparable; the reconstitution of the Dunn family is the first step in the rehabilitation of a society that has seemingly lost its heroes. It is a secret the father and son share, excluding the mother/wife.

Audrey decides to give the marriage another chance after David survives the train wreck. In essence, his superpower (invincibility) saves his marriage. Importantly, she never knows this—knowledge of the superpower is a male domain, a secret that bonds men and reaffirms patriarchal authority. Even Elijah's mother is not let in on the secret. She facilitates her son's acquisition of this knowledge, but she herself never acquires it. In fact, because she is the one who gives him access to it, Elijah is marked as outside the bounds of patriarchy. There is an implicit melodramatic crisis in the Price household, as the husband/father is an apparently absent figure. This further aligns Elijah with Joseph, so that the older man serves as a cautionary tale for the young boy. Without a father or the governing gaze of patriarchal authority, Elijah is both physically and morally weak. The best that Elijah can do, because of his role as a reader, is recognize the fantasy in reality, to see the moral truth that defines him, gives him meaning, by placing himself in opposition to it. He recognizes, through superhero texts, his inauthenticity in the eyes of patriarchy. Elijah's role is to reveal this moral truth to David: he is the white patriarch and white patriarchy is resolute, indeed, unbreakable. It is a fantasy of power and control, conferred onto David by Elijah and Joseph, which paints over the perpetual crisis in masculinity—the domestic/feminine—that determines the necessity of the superhero.

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NOTES

1. Significantly, the name of his gallery, "Limited Edition," echoes the same phrase emblazoned on the cover of the comic. This also indicates the status of both David (Bruce Willis) and Elijah (Samuel L. Jackson) in the film as one-of-a-kind beings.
2. Elijah also notes that the depiction of the two figures is "realistic," a self-reflexive moment emphasizing the fact that the superhero film at hand is much more "realistic" than typical genre fare. Self-reflexivity is also apparent when, in the previous scene, Elijah's mother (Charlayne Woodard) notes of the comic book, "They say it has a surprise ending."
3. Shyamalan uses an upside-down point of view shot later in the film to indicate further Elijah's childlike perspective and access to the truth. In the subway chase after the man whom David suspected of having a gun, Elijah falls. Shyamalan cuts to an upside-down point of view shot in which we (along with Elijah) see the gun described by David. This revelatory moment confirms for Elijah that David has special abilities.
4. Elijah's masculinity is marked as potentially problematic in this scene by a temporary paternal figure, the doctor, who attends to him shortly after he is born and who inscribes Elijah's body as a deviant one. This department store setting, strongly associated with women and the "feminine" act of shopping, also further places Elijah at the margins of normative masculinity.
5. This sequence also further emphasizes the link between Joseph and Elijah, as Shyamalan cross-cuts from Elijah in the comic book store to Joseph at home, holding two superhero action figures before his parents leave on a date.

SIMULATIONS OF EVIL IN M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN'S *THE VILLAGE*

MIRIAM JORDAN AND
JULIAN JASON HALADYN

Forgive us our silly lies, Ivy. They were not meant to harm.

—Edward

THE ILLUSION OF INNOCENCE

DURING A SECRET MEETING OF THE EIGHT VILLAGE ELDERS near the end of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* (2004), the utopian ideals that motivate the existence and constitution of the self-isolated community of Covington Woods are verbalized. This scene marks the beginning of a series of conceptual turning points in the plot of the film through which we discover not only that the fearful creatures that inhabit the woods are not real but also that the film itself is not set in the past but anachronistically located within the present. The time period that *The Village* is meant to represent is indeterminate, according to Michael Koresky in "Twilight of the Idyll: *The Village*," because Shyamalan has appropriated "a wide, almost timeless range of American custom, from religious conservatism to more secular folklore" creating "an ostensible period piece that investigates the basic governmental hypocrisies on which America is based." The elders construct a fictional existence of innocence within a romanticized simulation of the past to escape the predations of the contemporary world. Unable to view the outside world as anything but evil, the elders construct Covington Woods as a means of establishing a community

meant to preserve and safeguard the innocence that was lost to the violent events of their past—a task that they accomplish through terrorizing the community with a simulated evil.

The concept of simulation is intimately connected to virtually all aspects of life in the village, from its old-fashioned existence to the very beliefs and values held by the community. It is, however, the simulations of evil and the defensive structure put in place to resist these evils that fundamentally define the existence of the village as a space separate from the “real” or outside world. In “The Precession of Simulacra,” Jean Baudrillard describes simulation as being “no longer that of a territory, a referential, or a substance” but instead “is generated by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (1). As such, the evil that is simulated by the village elders constitutes the dialectic model used to generate the “real” or hyperreal space of Covington Woods, which must be understood in opposition to the realities of its origins.

It is at the secret meeting of the village elders that the founder of the community Edward Walker (William Hurt) informs the other elders of his decision to allow his daughter Ivy (Bryce Dallas Howard) to breach the borders of the village and travel through the forbidden woods into the towns in order to acquire medicines necessary to save the life of her fiancé, Lucius Hunt (Joaquin Phoenix). Upon the formation of the strict confines of this community, all the elders took an oath, as Mrs. Clack (Cherry Jones) informs Edward, “*Never to go back, never.*” Edward’s decision is therefore seen as a threat to the constitution of the village because Ivy’s journey will take her beyond the confines of the fiction of *innocence* that the elders are attempting to protect. When accused of jeopardizing the illusion of the village, Edward responds with a statement that gives viewers a rationale for understanding the *way of life* the elders envision: “Who do you think will continue this place, this life? Do you plan to live forever? It is in them that our future lies! It is in Ivy and Lucius that this . . . this way of life will continue. Yes, I have risked. I hope I am always able to risk everything for the just and right cause! If we did not make this decision, we could never again call ourselves innocent. And that, in the end, is what we have protected here! Innocence! That, I’m not ready to give up.” Maintaining this innocence is the defined purpose of the village. Through this construct, as well as the elaborate illusionary defensive network that protects it, the elders attempt to escape from a world where they believe innocence is no longer valued or protected.

This private exchange among the only members in this community who know of the existence of the contemporary world serves ultimately to contextualize the intentional lack of context that marks the events of

the film to this point. Beyond simply informing the viewer of the purpose behind the invention of this simulated historical refuge, Shyamalan presents a critique of the dangers of attempting to attain a state of security through the simulation of terror—a critique that directly relates to the political context in which the film is produced, specifically the climate of fear in the United States following the terrorist attacks of September 11. In this chapter, we argue that the simulation of evil and the manner in which the village elders use these simulations to create and maintain an artificial dichotomy between good and evil becomes more oppressive and terroristic upon the community than the evil that it is meant to defend against. Ironically, in attempting to create security the elders do so through, as Baudrillard states in “Hypotheses on Terrorism,” a “denial of reality” that “is terroristic in itself” and enacted through violence (80).

This simulated evil most notably takes the form of creatures symbolically named *Those We Do Not Speak Of* who terrorize the villagers if they dare enter the forbidden woods. The use of the phrase “*Those We Do Not Speak Of*” as both a vague and all encompassing statement of evil is analogous to the current usage of the term “terrorist,” which represent those who are considered enemies without having to address or discuss a specific person or group. In his depersonalizing those who are “evil” by employing blanket terminology, Shyamalan literalizes the unspoken element of this methodology, which turns those labeled as “evil” into those a society fears and therefore *doesn't speak of*. The pronounced “evil” of these nonhuman creatures, of which the community lives in a constant state of fear, functions as a counterpoint to the inhabitants of the village who are perceived as “good” and are protected by “silly lies,” which Edward tells Ivy near the end of the film “were not meant to harm.” The lies that Edward speaks of are themselves based on a binary conception of the world as divisible into good and evil. For Edward and the other elders who perpetuate these conditions of fear, each taking a turn donning the costume of the creatures and telling stories meant to enforce the protective boundaries of the community, their actions are meant to protect the virtues that they value. Edward makes this clear when defending his actions in allowing Ivy to leave the village, he states to the other elders, “What was the purpose of our leaving? Let us not forget it was out of hope of something good and right.” Edward’s statement brings to light the fundamental desire of the elders to form a community that is *good* and *right* as a means of leaving or escaping a world that they view as *evil* and *wrong*.

THE DICHOTOMY OF EVIL AND GOOD

The existence of the Covington Woods community, located in the middle of a forest within the confines of the Walker Nature Preserve, is the result

of a complex layering of simulated “evils” manufactured to obscure the evil of the outside world. The founding elders, who originally met as part of a therapy group, each had family members killed in violent crimes. This is revealed during the climactic scenes when we are made aware of the anachronistic nature of the village; Tabitha (Jayne Atkinson) and Edward unlock and open a black box while a series of voiceovers recount the “evils” from which the elders have fled. Mrs. Clack tells us that her “sister did not live past her twenty-third birthday. A group of men raped and killed her. They stuffed her in a dumpster, three blocks from our apartment.” August’s (Brendan Gleeson) story follows that of his neighbor. He tells us his “brother worked in an emergency room downtown. A drug addict came in with a wound to his ribs. My brother tried to dress the wound. He pulled a gun from his jacket, then he shot my brother through his left eye.” Following August’s story, Alice (Sigourney Weaver) tells us about her husband, Michael, who “left for the supermarket at a quarter past nine in the morning. He was found with no money and no clothes, in the East River, three days later.” The final story is Edward’s, which includes the genesis of his solution to all of their sorrows: “My father was shot by a business partner, who then hanged himself in my father’s closet. They had argued over money. I am a professor. I teach American history at the University of Pennsylvania. I have an idea that I would like to talk to you about.” In Edward’s story we witness a collapsing of his father’s death into the birth of this community, with tragedy serving as the foundation for the establishment of Covington Woods.

The convoluted structure of Covington Woods, as put into place by the founding elders, is defined by a strict boundary of opposing forces. This can be seen in the complex staging of simulated boundaries and security measures that are put into place in order to make sure that past evils will not return. The community is divided into two basic elements, the relative safety of the village and the danger of the surrounding woods, which Shyamalan thematically color codes with dark yellow, representing the safe color of the village, and red, symbolizing the “bad color” of the creatures that inhabit the surrounding woods. It should be noted that Shyamalan’s use of color coding bears a striking resemblance to the Homeland Security Advisory System in the United States, which uses red to indicate a severe risk of terrorist attacks, orange to indicate a high risk of terrorist attacks, and yellow to indicate an elevated risk of terrorist attacks. Significantly, the colors of *The Village* are strictly confined to the upper echelon of Homeland Security’s terrorist alert system and do not include the blue and green that represent a guarded or low risk of terrorism; instead—as in the United States itself—the alert seems to be

permanently fluctuating between red and yellow alerts. The villagers wear dark yellow hooded cloaks when patrolling and maintaining the border while Those We Do Not Speak Of wear red cloaks whenever they appear. This simple dichotomy represents the consistent oversimplification of “evil” within the life of the village. For example, near the beginning of the film we are presented with a picturesque scene in which two girls are sweeping a porch in a playful manner, until one of them notices a red flower growing off to the side of the house, which she immediately pulls out of the ground and fearfully buries in a shallow hole. Although we are given no indication as to the rationale for this bizarre response to the red flower at that time, it becomes clear as the narrative progresses the extent to which these extreme notions of good and evil prevail in the way of life in Covington Woods as tangible entities that can be physically confronted and controlled through a strict code of conduct.

The elders have attempted to create a community where only “good” exists, which they accomplish by simulating “evil” in a manner that they themselves can embody and control. In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Baudrillard argues that the response of the United States to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center only underlined the terrorists’ victory because the defense or “repression of terrorism spirals around as unpredictably as the terrorist act itself” (31). In this manner, *The Village* can be seen as Shyamalan’s critique of the current political environment of the United States in which the extreme measures that have been and are still being instituted to safeguard innocence against terrorists have become a perverse form of unpredictable terrorism for the American population. A parallel can be drawn between the nature preserve and the village hidden within it; the elders believe that this community preserves the values of innocence, values that are endangered by the evils of contemporary society. Shyamalan is presenting a cautionary tale in which the defense against the evil perpetrated upon the elders has become more oppressive and terroristic than the perceived evil of the outside world that it is defending against—a point made clear by the kindness shown to Ivy by the security guard patrolling the border of the Walker Nature Preserve, to whom she says, “You have kindness in your voice. I did not expect that.” To this end Covington Woods has been engineered to embody an ideal innocence that is maintained through a series of defensive networks put in place to protect and, more importantly, to define the community.

DEFENSE: THE OATH

The first of these protective layers, established as the very basis of the village, is the oath that the elders took never to leave Covington Woods.

As Tabitha Walker (Jayne Atkinson) reminds her husband Edward, "You have taken an oath, Edward, as all have, never to go back. It is a painful bargain, but no good can ever come without sacrifice. These are your words I'm saying. You cannot break the oath. It is sacred!" This oath represents what Baudrillard describes in *The Intelligence of Evil* as "a line you are forbidden to cross, the line marking a taboo on reality, a taboo also on even the slightest attempt at interfering with a clear division between good and evil" (22). This taboo on returning to the reality of the contemporary world is considered sacred and inviolable by the founding elders, who literally let their children die with the knowledge that they could save them if they crossed through the woods in search of medicine that they know to exist. In fact, our first introduction to the characters in this film takes place at the funeral for August Nicholson's (Brendan Gleeson) son, Daniel, whose death was due in part to the lack of contemporary medicine in the village. As Lucius (Joaquin Phoenix) states to the elders, "The passing of little Daniel Nicholson, from illness, and other events, have weighed on my thoughts. I ask permission to cross the forbidden woods and travel to the nearest town. I will gather medicines, and I will return." In this statement, Lucius draws attention to the death of Daniel from an illness that Lucius believes could have been treated with medicines from the towns. In seeking permission to transgress the inviolable boundaries that surround the town, Lucius is unknowingly seeking to violate the taboo on reality that the village elders have imposed upon themselves and their children. Yet this sacred oath ultimately fails to keep sorrow and evil at bay. As August tells Lucius the night of his son's funeral, "You may run from sorrow, as we have. Sorrow will find you." Although Lucius has no way of knowing, August is speaking of the elders' attempts to run away from grief with the establishment of Covington Woods, the real sacrifices of which he has just experienced through the loss of his son.

Yet, both the elders and August perceive this sacrifice as necessary to achieve the state of good and innocence that the village is meant to embody. It is important to stress that the belief the elders have in the sanctity of this village is almost religious in nature. It is this belief that allows the villagers to accept the sacrifices of their chosen life, sacrifices that are in turn used to further justify the convictions of their belief. Georges Bataille discusses the role of sacrifice in *The Accursed Share* stating, "Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane" (55). Accordingly, the sacrifices of the villagers serve to restore the sanctity of innocence, symbolically cleansing and purifying a world that has been profaned by violence. The oath of the elders requires sacrifice to maintain a clear division between good and evil. The stories of

these losses—August’s son, Ivy’s blindness, and quintessentially the mentally challenged Noah Percy (Adrien Brody)—serve to inspire a greater faith in the community as a sanctuary of innocence. Noah becomes the ultimate sacrifice for the elders who use the story of his death, which is attributed to Those We Do Not Speak Of, to continue justifying the defensive network protecting the village. “By positing Noah as a martyr to the village’s beliefs,” Patrick Collier notes, “[Edward] Walker lays the groundwork for integrating his loss into the ideological narratives that govern the village, thereby securing those narratives, after a period of vigorous contestation, by slightly revising them” (287). Even Ivy, who has broken the oath by leaving the sanctuary of the village and entering the contemporary world for medicines—even though she is literally *blind* to it—re-enters the community to reinforce the taboo on reality that she has just violated.

This sacred oath binds the inhabitants of the village to the valley in which the community is situated, a limitation enforced by the additional layers of defense—which are used to keep the evil outside by dissuading villagers from leaving Covington Woods. Even though the younger villagers are unaware of this oath, or the existence of the contemporary world outside of their preserve, they are still bound by this sacred taboo on reality and are deceived into living within the confines it has established. It is important to note that Edward’s reasons for wanting to break the oath point to the rationale for instituting it in the first place, namely to escape the evil of crime by which each of the elders were victimized. In Edward’s eyes, the stabbing of Lucius by Noah demonstrates the presence of evil within Covington Woods itself; he has to remind his friends that Lucius “is the victim of a crime” in order to make them realize how their vow has brought upon them the very misfortune they were attempting to escape.

DEFENSE: THE STORIES

The sacrifices of the community become an integral part of the mythologies and stories of the village itself, stories that function as the next line of defense. The telling of stories about the evils that live beyond the confines of the community is the primary means through which the elders dissuade the younger villagers from venturing outside of Covington Woods, since again they are unaware of the oath. These stories take two major forms: tales of Those We Do Not Speak Of and stories told by the elders of loved ones that have been killed in the towns. Ironically, in both cases these stories focus on a perceived “evil” that the elders *don’t speak of* and are used symbolically to prevent these evils from returning. When Lucius asks permission to leave the village and go to the towns for medicines,

expressing his confidence that Those We Do Not Speak Of will let him pass, his mother, Alice, for the first time tells him the story of how his father died: "Your father left for the market on a Tuesday, at a quarter past nine in the morning. He was found, robbed and naked, in the filthy river, two days later." Alice does not recount this story as a means of informing her son of the details of his father's death, but instead uses this "blackness"—as Lucius calls it—to convince him not to leave the village.

The contrasting perspectives represented by Alice and Lucius in this exchange point to a larger ethical dilemma that the village faces within this film. The purpose behind Alice telling her story is to protect and safeguard the community from evil, which she fears will return if she fails to prevent her son from leaving its confines. Yet, this is precisely why Lucius originally wanted to leave the community: in order to attain in the form of medicines a greater hope for the continuation of the community. Unlike his mother, his perspective is predicated upon a lack of fear concerning the evils of these stories and instead is based solely upon his desire to help the people of the village.

This desire on Lucius's part is again demonstrated when he sits with Finton Coin (Michael Pitt) in the watchtower in order to alleviate his fears. For Finton, as well as most of the younger inhabitants of the village, the stories told by the elders are real and function to dissuade them from wanting to leave the community. When Lucius asks Finton if he ever thinks about the towns, Finton replies, "The towns? What for? They're wicked places where wicked people live. That's all." Finton's oversimplified vision of the world outside of the village again follows the present logic in the United States, most visible in the pejorative designation "axis of evil," in which any country or group is dialectically designated as "evil" for opposing—in an expanded definition of the term—the "good" of America. This process aims to identify clearly the wicked places where wicked people live in order symbolically to eliminate the "evil" embodied by these people and places. According to Baudrillard in *Violence of the Virtual and Integral Reality*, while evil "used to be metaphysical or moral," it "now is materialized, embodied in the genes (it can just as well be turned into the Axis of Evil)." The evil stories of the towns that circulate through the villagers, like those of the creatures living in the forbidden woods, make evil a physical entity that can be combated through discrimination. These narratives form the mythology of the village and its basis for existing as a sanctuary of innocence.

These stories reinforce the illusory dichotomy of good and evil that is the basis of the village—where elders even fool themselves into believing that they have exorcised evil from their daily existence. In the scenes

that lead up to Ivy's entrance into the contemporary world, we witness Edward and Tabitha opening the locked wooden box that they have in the corner of their home. Each of the elders possesses a black box in which he or she keeps the evidence of his or her previous contemporary life hidden away. As Lucius says to his mother, Alice, pointing at the box in their living room, "There are secrets in every corner of this village. Do you not feel it? Do you not see it?" These boxes represent a line the elders are not willing to transgress, another taboo on reality that contains the kernel of their past experiences of evil, which they have failed to exorcise. As Alice tells Lucius, "That is for my own well-being, so the evil things from my past are kept close and not forgotten. Forgetting would be to let them be born again in another form." Lucius points out her self-delusion when he challenges her by responding, "Then let us open it." Alice's refusal to open this box reveals her ironic inability to share her past, which she has vowed not to forget, with Lucius so that he can help prevent it from being born again in the village. These boxes make physical the loss of loved ones, those whom the elders *do not speak of*, and the violence that justifies the self-imposed isolation of the village—as embodied in the creatures as Those We Do Not Speak Of.

DEFENSE: THE BORDER

The most visible and active form of defense for the village consists of the watchtower and a series of dark yellow banners and torches that encircle the perimeter of the village. These physical elements serve to demarcate the line that separates the village from the forbidden woods and Those We Do Not Speak Of, who are the final layer of defense that the elders have put into place. This line is protected and patrolled by the younger male members of the community, such as Finton and Lucius, who sit in the watchtower and sound the alarm if the creatures breach the border. In addition, they are also responsible for the ceremonial practices of lighting the torches at night and performing the rituals that placate the creatures, such as the ceremony of meat—in which sizable pieces of raw meat are tossed into the forbidden forest as a sacrifice to appease the creatures. During the performance of these activities the villagers wear hooded cloaks of the safe color, a dark yellow, as a form of talisman or protection. This again makes visible the distinction between the good (yellow) of the village, whose border is clearly marked by the dark yellow banners, and the evil (red) that lives outside of the village.

Lucius transgresses this defensive line when he steps into the forbidden forest while patrolling the border of the village. He is seen entering the forbidden zone by an elder dressed as one of the creatures. The response

of the elders demonstrates how the various layers of this defensive network function to safeguard the integrity of the community. No time is wasted in enforcing the laws set in place to protect this insular community. The following night, Finton looks down from the watchtower—in a fragmented point-of-view shot—as *Those We Do Not Speak Of* breach the border and enter the village. Finton sounds the alarm bell and all the villagers hide in their cellars, exiting the following morning to find that the doors of every structure in the village have been marked by a slash of red. This symbolically violent act creates a palpable fear among the residents, who respond with panic. The spectacle thus created through the specter of good and evil uses fear as a means of enforcing obedience.

In the meeting hall that same day, August asks, “Creatures have never attacked us without reason. Does anyone here know of a reason why these events may have occurred?” Lucius submits a letter taking responsibility that is read aloud by one of the elders for the whole village to hear: “Please read so that all may hear. I have brought this burden upon us. On the day before last, I crossed the forbidden line into Covington Woods . . . and was witnessed there by *Those We Do Not Speak Of*. I am deeply sorry. I have shamed myself and my family. I pray that my actions will cause no further pains. With deepest sorrow, Lucius Hunt.” Afterwards, with the entire community watching, Edward approaches Lucius and says, “Do not fret . . . You are fearless in a way that I shall never know.” As Collier notes, “By praising his courage rather than recriminating against or punishing him, Walker allows the myth to accrue credibility: he establishes Lucius as one of the village’s finest and most promising young members just as Lucius has thrown his own nascent authority (an authority Walker redoubles) behind the myth” (276). In this way, the defensive network that constitutes the forbidden line into Covington Woods and the simulated evil of *Those We Do Not Speak Of* are given public authority and used to dissuade villagers from leaving the community. In addition, these security measures also serve to perpetuate and even strengthen the sense of the innocence of the community through the stories and acts of forgiveness that keep it intact.

All of these elements, each put into place by the elders who established this refuge as a means of safeguarding the residents of the village against the evils of the exterior world, depend on the younger villagers believing that the evil creatures are real, an illusion that makes all the other defenses justifiable and “good.” *Those We Do Not Speak Of* do not allow the villagers to enter their territory and they in turn do not enter the village; the result of this restriction is the complete containment and isolation of the village from the outside world. These creatures come to signify the most

blatant manifestation of evil for the younger villagers, keeping them in a constant state of fear and defensiveness. It is this fear of the creatures that keeps the cohesion of the village intact through the communal activities surrounding the protection and safeguarding of the boundary line that encircles the community, a taboo line that is not crossed without consequence. By making the creatures real, and formulating an elaborate defensive network within the village to protect the community from this simulated evil, the elders establish a good-versus-evil binary that they control in order to maintain a state of innocence. The rationale for these actions, as well as the oath never to return to the outside world, is the “hope of something good and right,” as Edward states.

MAKING THE STORIES REAL

What begins as a seemingly simple tale of good and evil, in which the “good” townspeople in a distant American past are fearfully confined within the space of their village by “evil” monsters, turns out to be a contemporary fable of the dangers that come from simulating evil—set within post-9/11 America (a world that we glimpse briefly in the headlines of the newspaper in the guardhouse). As Edward reveals to Ivy after he has agreed to allow her to leave the village, the creatures are merely simulations:

Edward: There did exist rumors of creatures in these woods. It is in one of the history books I used to teach in the towns.

Ivy: The screams? From the woods?

Edward: We created those sounds.

Ivy: The Ceremony of Meat?

Edward: We remove it ourselves. An elder is always assigned.

Ivy: The drills . . . they are farce, too?

Edward: We did not want anyone to go to the towns, Ivy.

This elaborate illusion is ultimately what constitutes the existence of the village, which retains its integrity and innocence only as a result of the constant threat that Those We Do Not Speak Of pose. The elders’ belief in the innocence of the village is paradoxically used to justify the systemic infliction of simulated “evils” and terrors upon the community as a means of protecting the villagers from the wickedness of the external world and, therefore, protecting their innocence. All the elders are so caught up in perpetuating the simulations of evil, illusions that they use to hide the sorrows from which they are running, that they fail to see it being reborn in Noah.

Noah Percy is treated as the true innocent of the village because of his mental deficiency and, as a result, his troublesome and often violent actions are constantly overlooked. Ironically, Noah's violent acts punctuate and propel the plot of the film forward and ultimately reaffirm the village as an illusionary construct. His skinning of livestock, for example, which are found throughout the village as a type of warning, represents the earliest of these actions that we witness. After the first defiled animal is discovered by a group of school children, its head "twisted back, and much of its fur removed," Edward asks, "What manner of spectacle has attracted your attention so splendidly?" Noah's acts of violence are displayed in a series of frightening spectacles that are naturally blamed by the younger villagers on *Those We Do Not Speak Of*, because they have been conditioned to view all evil acts as originating from these unnamable creatures. Noah physically and conceptually takes on the role of *Those We Do Not Speak Of*. He is able to accomplish this when he discovers a spare costume of the creatures that the elders have hidden under the floorboards of the quiet room in which he is imprisoned; he literally unearths the evil buried by the elders. The spectacle that Edward thinks the children are seeing turns out to be the spectacle of his own illusions as enacted by Noah.

IVY AS HERO

Edward, as the author of the fictions that construct Covington Woods, is unable to negotiate the reality that he knows to exist outside the forest. The world as it appears to him is one that he chooses not to interact with; in his melancholic state, Edward refuses to deal with death and loss as part of reality instead making it an "evil" that is outside the "good" life he has built. In response, he rejects the real and replaces it with a simulation in which good and evil are distinct. He is in effect constrained by his oath to disavow reality and his corresponding view of himself. In his mind he is not fearless, but his blind daughter is. Ivy is the only one to undertake the journey to the wicked townships, which is necessary to save Lucius, herself, and ultimately the village. Thus it is left to Ivy to be the hero of this narrative. Mikhail Bakhtin conceives of the hero as being in a position "to interpret and evaluate his own self and his surrounding reality" (47). Accordingly, what is important for Ivy is the question of how she perceives herself and the world. Faced with the realization that the immediate boundaries of her world are a fairytale meant to protect her, she must then make the journey to the unknown world outside the village, one that she has been taught is filled with death and violence. Ivy responds to the dangers she encounters—ironically being the manifestations of evil created by the village and not of the outside world—with the freedom and independence that is the

purview of a hero. In fact, it is Ivy's journey that fundamentally determines the continuing existence of both the community of Covington Woods and the simulated innocence that the village is meant to represent.

The question remains: why does Ivy continue the charade of the village? It is not that she simply fails to tell the villagers the truth of the outside world, which she arguably was not able to see, or that she claims to have killed one of the creatures, which she knows not to exist, but that she allows the story of her killing of Noah to be used further to fortify the enclosure of the village. In this act Ivy can be seen as occupying a heroic position that is, to use Friedrich Nietzsche's term, beyond good and evil as it is understood through the construct of the village. The dichotomy established by the village elders, which allows the inhabitants of the village to perceive themselves as "good" in direct relation to the "evil" of these nonhuman creatures, is no longer the means by which Ivy views herself or her actions. Instead, Ivy as the hero must view herself in relation to what she knows to be her surrounding reality. She has put herself at risk to save the one thing that makes her life worth living; what she fears most is losing Lucius. Thus, when she is faced with the presence of a creature, one that she knows to be made up simply to terrify her and others into protective obedience, she recognizes that she is beyond such constraints. By risking her life, Ivy demonstrates her freedom, that she is beyond "good" and "evil," and can no longer "believe naively that the progress of Good . . . corresponds to a defeat of Evil," but has come to understand that the two "are at once both irreducible to each other and inextricably interrelated" (Baudrillard, *Spirit* 13).

As the hero of *The Village*, Ivy's power comes from her inability to see the limitations in front of her, an advantage that ultimately enables her to bring hope to the village. After Noah stabs Lucius and it is clear that he will not live without medicine, Ivy is granted permission to transgress the taboo on reality that constitutes the community. Edward allows Ivy the hope that this quest gives her, even though her actions may cause the entire village as a construct to break down, because he understands that without this hope—a hope that he is no longer able to provide for the younger generation of the community—the innocence of the village will be corrupted, becoming little more than a selfish escape for the elders at the expense of their children. As August tells the elders, "Ivy's running toward hope, let her run. If this place is worthy, she'll be successful in her quest." If the village is worthy, according to the elders, Ivy's quest for hope will be successful and Covington Woods as a construct will remain viable. This is the test that Edward believes the village must be put to in order for it to remain innocent. The death of Noah, who is killed by Ivy

while terrorizing her dressed as Those We Do Not Speak Of, is used to make the stories real and back up the simulation of evil that constitutes Covington Woods. This is seen when Edward states, “We will find him. We will give him . . . a proper burial. We will tell the others . . . he was killed by the creatures. Your son has made our stories real. Noah has given us a chance to continue this place.” Because Ivy tells the tale of killing one of the creatures, with full knowledge that Those We Do Not Speak Of are illusions, she has chosen to reinforce the simulated networks that protect and sustain the village. In this act, Ivy has perpetuated the “silly lies” that the village depends on for its continued existence. The restoration of the sacred oath that binds—and blinds—the community together, an oath that was threatened by the eruption of evil due to Noah’s violent acts, is reestablished through the death of Noah at the hands of Those We Do Not Speak Of, which reinforces the simulated boundaries of good and evil on which Covington Woods is predicated. The hope that Ivy brings to the village through the success of her journey is the validation that the way of life in Covington Woods, as well as the simulated “evils” that constitute this community, are worthy and innocent. In effect Ivy is making sacred that which has been profaned, which she accomplishes by reaffirming the sacred confines and defined circle of the village.

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CHAPTER 12

“SOMETHING ANCIENT IN MODERN TIMES”

MYTH AND MEANING-MAKING IN M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN’S *LADY IN THE WATER*

NICHOLAS PARKER AND NIRMAL TRIVEDI

NUMEROUS CRITICS HAVE COMPLAINED SINCE ITS RECENT RELEASE THAT *Lady in the Water* (2006) is a profoundly frustrating text. Culminating in a Razzie for worst director and worst supporting actor for M. Night Shyamalan in February 2007, critique of the film has been vehement to the point of being vicious. Michael Phillips in the *Chicago Tribune* complains that “just when the story begs for some clean lines and a sense of direction, we get dithering and misdirection and another confused-tenants sequence.” Peter Travers’s *Rolling Stone* review argues that “the movie is a muddle, burdened with too many characters and a sorry lack of thrills, flair and coherence.” The film “doesn’t make a drop of sense” (Westhoff). Its producer has “lost his creative marbles” (Dargis). Details like the result of a Google search on the name of the film’s monsters are cited by Michael Atkinson of *The Village Voice* as another critique of the film: “What scrunt musters up when Googled is proof as well that Shyamalan don’t surf.” Even the depiction of the men living in one of the apartments reveals for one critic that “Shyamalan has obviously never, ever been stoned.” Both larger and smaller publications seem to share in this kind of inflammatory judgment, sometimes of the text but more often of its director, using the film as a launching pad for wide-ranging and largely tangential commentary.

Why critics should be quite so animated is worth some exploration. Shyamalan and his text, it seems, provoke some anxiety that must be invidiously put down. Lisa Schwarzbaum reveals this anxiety as an uneasy coexistence of rational thought with what we will argue is myth. Writing in *Entertainment Weekly*, she is not far from the truth in pointing out that *Lady in the Water* has an “unease as a cohesive piece.” There is an implication that this discomfort is something to be avoided—that coherence is a primary concern. Why should there be this inference in her criticism? Could we not argue then that the “unease” that Schwarzbaum cites is not the film’s but her own? The assumption of coherence is at the crux of much of the criticism; however, we will assert that the possibility of such coherence itself is in fact a central theme of the film. Ultimately, our argument is that *Lady in the Water* is about reading and the possibility of doing so coherently even if this possibility is never fulfilled. The film toys with the notion of coherence, resulting in a resistant text that forces “readers” to work hard to come to terms with it.

The intricacies that surround the diegesis of *Lady in the Water* are, as Travers and others have indicated, convoluted. The film surrounds a condominium complex in Philadelphia managed by Cleveland Heep (Paul Giamatti), and replete with a variety of idiosyncratic residents. Cleveland discovers a water nymph called Story (Bryce Dallas Howard) living in the complex’s pool. Story needs to find a hitherto unknown “vessel” among the residents, a writer who will have a profound influence on the world in the future, with whom she can commune before returning home to the ocean. There is also the threat of a creature called a scrut who hunts Story. Other residents potentially can take on protective roles of various kinds to ensure Story’s safe passage home.

The critical consensus appears to be that the process of inscription and reinscription of roles in the narrative is confusing and unnecessary. Phillips sums up this point of view when he argues that “determining the identities of the guardian and the guild takes up an ill-advised amount of screen time.” To do some disservice to the spirit but not the letter of one reviewer’s comments, it is true that “at times it seems cast members are making up the story as they go” (*Vice*). This anxiety about incoherence does not seem manifest in critical responses to other directors, most notably in the assessment of David Lynch, whose popularity is well established. While both directors produce experimental narratives, Lynch’s audience carries a very different set of expectations than Shyamalan’s about narrative ambiguity. Lynch remains firmly positioned within art-house conventions. In contrast, Shyamalan makes Hollywood films; he employs mainstream stars, spends many times Lynch’s budgets, and works within

genre. One explanation for the particular critical disdain for *Lady in the Water's* ambiguity then is arguably Shyamalan's inclination to warp films that are working within purportedly explicable mainstream genres.

MEANING-MAKING MODES

It is illuminating in this context to consider the logic that drives a common desire for rationalist narrative solidity. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argue that the project of the Enlightenment as a whole is predicated on the notion that reason must supersede mythmaking as a means of understanding the world. Radically opposed to myth, "the program of the Enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy" (3). The grounds for this determined exorcism is an assumption that myth is based on an irrational fear of the unpredictability (the incomprehensibility) of the world around us. The reasoning subject cannot allow the mysterious or protean element, which it claims myth tolerates, to stand, since "there is to be no mystery—which means, too, no wish to reveal mystery" (5). Horkheimer and Adorno claim that reason discredits mythmaking as an irresponsible contrivance of understanding: "From now on [after the Enlightenment], matter would at last be mastered without any illusion of ruling or inherent powers, of hidden qualities. For the Enlightenment, whatever does not conform to the rule of computation and utility is suspect. So long as it can develop undisturbed by any outward repression, there is no holding it" (6). What is introduced in *Lady in the Water*, we assert, is the suggestion of something fundamentally threatening in the adherence to the mythmaking mode that helps to drive reason's denunciation of it. To consent to mythmaking, for reasoning subjects, is to manufacture a meaning akin to the "scrunt," a contrivance that only purports to locate a threateningly mutable universe.

While the film appears at face value to be content with simply entertaining its audience without its creative engagement—as a spectacle—it is actually seriously committed to this mythmaking mode of storytelling. As the voice of Vick (Shyamalan) explains, the storyteller responsible for the events dramatized by the film "is someone who's doing something ancient, ancient in modern times." Many—perhaps the majority—of critics who responded so negatively to the film arguably were applying exclusively rationalist reading paradigms, rendering the film as a whole unpalatable—the critics indeed were so profoundly unnerved that Shyamalan himself was denigrated so that critical reading practices could be maintained. *Lady in the Water* we assert is threatening to critics conditioned by a reading mode that requires the exposure of complex systems

of logic “inside” the text rather than the personal creation of narrative meaning from its wreckage. What becomes apparent in surveying the critical response is not simply that many critics were (and remain) antagonistic to mythmaking as foundational to storytelling, but that they were uncomfortable to the point of terror that it could coexist with the film’s purported generic forms. What is worryingly unexpected about *Lady in the Water* is the introduction of two generic modes of mythmaking unfamiliar to critics of Shyamalan’s film, namely, the children’s story and the folktale. These two genres are the central vehicles for Shyamalan’s storytelling paradigm.

Before *Lady in the Water* was a film, according to Shyamalan, it was a bedtime story. And the children’s book, which Shyamalan published in 2006 and on which the film is based, curiously is full of ellipses. Whole pages consist only of images of a secluded swimming pool, without signs of character or active narrative. There are pages with cryptic statements, such as “If the sprinklers go off by mistake, you should take notice. It might mean something.” The large format white pages with so little overt content highlight the space of possibility that a story like this one promotes—a space in which young readers can build imaginative structures to make the narrative meaningful for them. What the critics complained about in the various reinscriptions of the guild in the film is analogous to the white space on the page of the original children’s story. They are the openings for us to begin an unfamiliar but no less valid way of reading. The film collapses the distinction between the children’s book and a narrative that is considered to be exclusively adult.

Donna E. Norton’s reader, *An Introduction to Children’s Literature*, draws a fundamental association in child readers between meaning-making and creative play (18) in which the child’s reading act is a form of creativity formed by a rebellion against order. In the light of Horkheimer and Adorno’s depiction of repressive reason, this kind of creative play constitutes a rebellion. As Brian Sutton-Smith puts it, “what children find most enjoyable is often . . . subversive” (6). Children, however, are protected from the potential dangers of creative play. Children’s literature works within a regulated structure of laws, and *Lady in the Water* follows this example. The monstrous Tartushik “keep the law” in the fantasy world from which Story initially emerges. When Cleveland expresses concern for Story about journeying home, Story comforts him, saying, “There are laws. It will be safe. I’m allowed to leave this night.” These are examples of a safety net wherein children, and now the adult viewers of *Lady in the Water*, can explore the possibilities of creative play while protected by the logic of law. Thus, the radicalism of films like those by

David Lynch is curtailed in Shyamalan's work in the child reading mode where we, as adults, play in and around structures of law, rather than dismantling them.

The child at play is, we argue, the mode of reading the film offers adults and even critics in the film version of his book. For reasons that are telling of our "developing" reading skills, the film is one whose challenge increases exponentially for each higher level of disenchantment about the possibility of creative reading. Sutton-Smith asserts that children "revel [in] their own youthful actions [which] no longer seem profound or moving to adults or [are] antithetical . . . to the institutional or everyday hegemonies of the life about them" (6).

Just as *Lady in the Water* calls to be read as a children's story, it also reads as a folktale in terms of its motifs and its rendering. The folklorist F. H. Lee writes, "Folk-tales have been described as 'the little novels of childlike intellects.' They belong to and issue from a class whose daily life lies close the earth—toilers in the field and in the forest, who render with simple directness, in stories or charms, their impressions of the natural or supernatural forces with which their own lives are environed" (v). Folktales are essentially tales of fantasy told as if they were true, wherein the tale's meaningfulness emerges from its relation to a community of tellers and listeners. The importance of this oral tradition to the film becomes apparent when Young-Soon (Cindy Cheung) relates to Cleveland how the ancient bedtime story that forms the background of the film was passed on from person to person with no discernible origin, eventually becoming a part of her mother's experience. Speaking to Cleveland, Young-Soon translates, "she knew someone who knew someone who saw one." The fact that we see Young-Soon translate her mother's story reminds us that the process of reinventing the bedtime story continues with her, as she becomes a storyteller and Cleveland a story listener.

While folklore motifs are common in many stories, Shyamalan's film makes a particularly self-conscious effort to remind its viewers of this mode. The film narrates a simple story of how "man and those in the water were [once] linked" but, over time, have become alienated from each other in order to provide what can be seen as a universal concern about listening and learning from others. Like many folktales, the story foregrounds water as a source of renewal, mythological characters like the "narf" and the "scrunt" function to order a cosmic vision of questionable order, and mythic elements and banal moments of everyday life are interwoven to connect the world of the storyteller and story listener to the mythic world. Thus, the film is a text about reading, which progressively embroils more and more viewers, generating a parallel reading

community. The sources of information that are present are profoundly limited or protean, and the fragments that come from them compel creative reading acts.

These two modes, of child narrative and folktale, require a leap of faith from the reader to participate in a community of meaning-making. Drawing from reader-response criticism and systems theory, Brian Sturm usefully describes the storytelling event as when “a storyteller recounts the text, while the listeners create the true story based on the verbal text as overlaid with personal images and memories. Whereas there is a continual feedback loop present in any storytelling event—as the teller changes the story to accommodate the audience—the unit of study . . . is more each listener’s experience than the storyteller’s performance” (Sturm 15). Rather than understanding the film as one about how storytelling becomes meaningful, critics have misread it as a rational exercise of presenting and resolving a simple mystery that does not require their intervention. We argue however that the film solicits from its readers the kind of hope that Cleveland asks from Story when he, as the reader, is deeply embroiled in the intricacies of *Lady in the Water*: “You have to believe that this all makes sense, somehow.”

LADY IN THE WATER’S COMMUNITY OF READERS

Lady in the Water narrates the process of creative meaning-making through its central character Cleveland Heep. The trajectory of Cleveland’s development over the course of the film might be called a rebirth or recovery of original reading skills. We discover ultimately the issue that has incapacitated Cleveland’s reading ability. He is circling his own trauma: the death of his family. To reach this realization, he enacts a journey that is akin to that of several other key characters (and antithetical to that of Mr. Farber [Bob Balaban]) that begins with his creative stasis and gradually moves to his reemergence as an active reader. As such, he stands as a proxy for the kind of viewer the film as a whole demands.

At the film’s start, Cleveland is quick to repress moments of potential creative meaning-making. There are, he insists in the opening scene, “no such thing as creatures.” Young-Soon tells Farber that Cleveland wants to conceal the reading he does engage in (“Mr. Heep loves learning. He doesn’t want anyone to know”). He does not seem tempted to read and comment on even the overdetermined character types that surround him. Showing Farber, the new tenant, around the building for the first time, he does not comment on why Reggie (Freddy Rodríguez) works out only one side of his body, why Mr. Leeds (Bill Irwin) never leaves his

apartment, or what the group of meandering young people do with most of their time.

When Cleveland and Story first meet, his position in relation to hers is parental: "You can wait here until you feel not so scared . . . Oh my God, you're just a kid." She then falls asleep in his lap like a young child. But the dynamic changes quickly as Cleveland buys into the narrative she initiates about the vessel. He recounts to Vick the "pins and needles kind of feeling" that Story questions him about, showing some early investment in her fantasy. He is so committed to the plausibility of her story that he eventually risks his life in trying to recover the magic medicine she needs to survive. Story becomes the adult and teacher then, and Cleveland the pupil and child, leading to her pronouncement, "You have a purpose. All beings have a purpose. Your words are very beautiful. Your heart is very big." The film illustrates in this reversal that acts of interpretation emerge from the reading modes of a child.

As Cleveland becomes more concerned about Story's quest to find a vessel and to return home, he begins to read the characters around him as purposeful. Cleveland attempts to endear himself to Mrs. Choi (June Kyoto Lu) so she will retell the original Korean folktale of the water nymph. It is at this moment that the film best illustrates the creative possibilities of adults reading as a prerational reader would. He eats milk and cookies, doesn't wipe the milk from his lips, and comically lays in a fetal position. As this rebirth occurs, Cleveland has to learn basic reading practices—so much so that he initially feels he must ask the advice of the trained critic Farber before he can choose the characters he needs to complete the story. In due course though, he determines the characters for the ceremony on his own interpretations of Mrs. Choi's folktale. He chooses two characters to complete the group: one man is one who "has no secrets" from him and the other is one who he "greatly respects." Both of these traits are only perceivable in these roles from his point of view. Cleveland is building the narrative himself—becoming a reader in the limited, but also liberating, ways of which he is capable.

As Cleveland begins to build a narrative from the seemingly disparate elements around him, he invites others to engage in playful acts of creative meaning-making. *Lady in the Water* has a plethora of characters in fact who either demand, in unusual allegorical ways, to be read, or offer us exemplars for the possibilities of reading we could do with them. As Young-Soon puts it, "That is the moral of the bedtime-story. No one is ever told who they are." Some become completely invested in the play: Young-Soon feels the weight of the story as Cleveland brings it out of her. Dury's son (Noah Gray-Cabey) creates structure from the boxes. Reggie

stares down the scrunt at Cleveland's calling. Vick's sister (Sarita Choudhury) draws parallels with her own childhood.

Some characters become completely invested in establishing their identities and those of all others within the emerging community of readers. Young-Soon, responding to Mr. Leeds's resistance to reading as a child, exclaims, "It's time to prove some stories are real!" Young-Soon, the translator of the ancient bedtime story to Cleveland, figures as the least skeptical of alternative reading practices. As the narrative progresses, she gains increasing confidence in the folk belief that one can bridge the world of everyday realities with those of the mythic world through the telling of stories. Claiming a connection in spirit to Cleveland, she acknowledges, "I think we are linked. It's not just a story to me either. I want to believe it's true."

The progress of the narrative construction grinds to a halt at one point, and the assembled group cannot construct a meaningful narrative to explain events. They then turn to a child, Mr. Dury's son, who possesses what is in this world the ultimate skill—he can string together otherwise completely disparate imagery (from cereal boxes) into narratives that will offer the group more evidence with which to sustain themselves. In the context of the film, this character represents a total investment in the meaning-making paradigm.

Several characters throughout the film undergo a transition from a position in which their role is uncertain to one mediated by their ability to read creatively. Mr. Dury (Jeffrey Wright), for example, who spends most of his time exercising his gift for word puzzles, declaims any greater interpretive abilities by stating that "unfortunately, my skills are limited to crossword puzzles." His gift gains greater significance, however, once he makes the creative leap of speculating on meanings between the seemingly unconnected words. Becoming an "interpreter," he makes what at face value seems the implausible connection that the words "essential," "scheme," and "soirée" together signify that the apartment residents must throw a party in order to facilitate Story's return home. Clearly, such an interpretation would be suspect to doubt by an audience trained to make rational connections, but perhaps not for one who attempts to read in a childlike and folktale manner. Doubtful of his capacity for reading as a child, Mr. Dury undermines the meaning in his interpretation, pleading for others not to take him seriously: "We're just playing here, right?" or later insisting, "we're all just seeing what we want to." Mr. Dury's resistance to reading playfully despite his success and persuasiveness among his peers underlines how the film portrays rationalistic and doggedly skeptical reading practices as internalized and dominant at the cost of alternative, mythmaking modes of reading. As in the case with Reggie,

Mr. Dury is revealed not to be *the* interpreter, but is nonetheless valuable as an interpreter who carries the group forward with his readings until another is found in the figure of Mr. Dury's son, a child.

The character who appears most confounded by the possibility of creative meaning-making is Mr. Leeds, whose persistent lack of belief in meaning has prevented him from understanding the world as anything but "awful." At a critical moment, he confesses that he "wanted to believe more than most. I wanted to be like a child again. I needed to believe that there's something more than this awfulness around us." Watching endless scenes of war and violence on television, Mr. Leeds suspends disbelief and engages in an irrational and childlike act of playing with symbols, ultimately challenging his bleak picture of the world.

In addition to those characters who act as proxies for what the film demands should be our new creative reading practice, there are some who help to illustrate potential pitfalls we might encounter as we learn this process. The character of Reggie provides an example of how the film presents a character with a proscribed role, only to ask its viewers to imagine alternative possibilities. This strategy of misdirection, where details are obscured to force our creative abilities to step in, is reinforced in Reggie's seemingly extraordinary idiosyncrasy. Working on one part of his body only and measuring the difference from one bicep versus the other, Reggie explains that he's "like a scientist." The meaning of his experiments appears to be a misguided exercise in scientific research or an overdetermined explanation on Shyamalan's part of how science alone cannot explain behavior. The trait's peculiarity demands a creative reading act on our part to make him logically fit the tale we are now involved in constructing.

A critical reader might ask why Reggie would rationally engage in such a project and an audience member might be inclined to dismiss the character as merely affecting a comic interlude. These two readers are in fact represented through the two other characters in the scene in which Reggie is introduced. Mr. Farber (Bob Balaban), a quintessentially critical reader, watches Reggie, in bewildered fascination, as he works out one arm and demonstrates the "four and a half inch" difference between biceps. As Cleveland enters the scene, Reggie explains, "Me and the new guy, we're talking science." Recognizing Farber's confusion, Cleveland offers a placating explanation, "Reggie just wants to be special." Reducing Reggie's behavior as simultaneously strange and familiar despite being without a clear motivation, Cleveland presents an alternative reading of understanding Reggie as the comic sidelight that he appears to be.

As it turns out though, Reggie's importance at the end of the film is significant but is in no way related to his seemingly symbolic talent. He

is able to stare down the scrunt but not to wrestle it to the ground, for example. We cannot read him in the way that it appears the film at first demands. Despite the critical comments that critique this kind of confusion in the film, this misdirection is an effective means to confound our ability to read from the text, without the notion of creative contrivance on our part, in a narrative that most critics have seen as crying out for reading. The point here is not that Reggie occupies one role that supersedes another, but that the film offers up an openness of interpretative possibilities without necessarily substituting one for the other. Throughout the film, characters and behaviors are portrayed as potentially meaningless while always carrying with them the openness of being meaningful in a given circumstance.

While there are exemplars in the film of the archetypal viewer of it, there is also, in the figure of Mr. Farber, an archetype of the kind of “nonreader” that purely rationalist modes of engagement can promote. By nonreader, we mean a subject engaging with the text as entirely free of creative space, imbued with concrete and ultimately explicable “meaning,” and with the possibility that one might otherwise construct meanings independently exorcised. Reviewers of the film have widely criticized the characterization of Mr. Farber as simply a shot at all those critics who have assailed Shyamalan’s previous films. Jim Emerson argues that Farber “is this film’s own resident newspaper movie critic, offering caustic, self-aware commentary on the shortcomings of *Lady in the Water* as it sloshes along. In Shyamalan’s rickety mythology, Mr. Farber represents . . . well, nothing so much as the filmmaker’s pre-emptive strike against the bad reviews he expects to receive for making this poorly written, stiffly directed, audience-insulting story-without-a-cause.”

This motivation could be at play here, at least in part, especially considering the critical approbation increasingly felt toward each of his films since *The Sixth Sense*. Farber, however, is also a magnified version of the reductive reader, offset against Cleveland’s mythmaking figure, which helps us perceive the latter’s developing skill. Farber’s reading of the various roles, given without thought or reflection, is quite literally presumptuous, and implies that there is nothing open or fluid in the location of them. Thus, he advises that Cleveland merely “look for any group of characters that are always seen together and have seemingly irrelevant and tedious dialogue that seems to regurgitate forever.” For Farber, the entire folklore narrative is simply a text that calls for the collating of numerous other narratives to learn to read critically, since “there is no originality left in the world.” When Cleveland tries to engage with one of Farber’s statements about another text (a romance film he has been compelled to watch), the reading possibilities he opens up are determinately put down:

Farber: It was a typical romance. It ended with them telling each other they loved each other in the rain. Why does everyone like standing around in the rain?

Cleveland: Perhaps it's a metaphor for purification and starting anew.

Farber: No, it's not.

The film makes an unequivocal statement that this kind of closed thinking is not tenable in a creative diegesis such as this one. When confronted with the scrunt during the party, Farber thinks his detailed reading knowledge can save him, since the actions of each subject in a narrative are ultimately predictable. For Farber, in other words, this is no more than "a moment from a horror movie." That he does not make it to the door before the scrunt attacks suggests the text is more open than Farber is willing to conceive.

Having negotiated the reading roles of his fellow characters, the final stage of Cleveland's own development comes in a personal engagement with the narrative that can only come from a purely creative act. Cleveland takes on the roles first of guardian and ultimately of healer himself. Were the water nymph's narrative a critical object external to him (parallel to the kind of text that most critics have called for in the film as a whole), he could not cast himself inside it. "Outside" the diegesis, this is in important ways "our" story, but "inside" it is Cleveland's. Through Cleveland's model we can perceive our investment in making the film "succeed" or



Cleveland Heep discovers his role in Story's story

“fail,” and then take on the responsibility for meaning-making in a safe space where the ultimately illusory patterns we see are playfully intricate and can be reordered repeatedly. The very last line of the script reads, “Thank you for saving my life.” It is hyperbolic in some ways, in line with the scale of this mythical narrative as a whole, but it is also a statement of Cleveland’s reemergence as a creative reader, a state that seems plausibly akin to our perennial, living states of mind.

Critics have argued that Shyamalan casting himself as the actor who plays the vessel of change in the film reflects an inherent narcissism. While the film suggests that Vick is the crucial vessel of change, we would like to suggest that there are in fact many vessels in the film, and it can be seen as a trope that represents the one who will change the world through his writing. Because writing refers to creative acts of meaning-making amid fragmentary elements, the vessel could be a number of characters, most clearly Cleveland. He is after all also a writer—the writer of a journal that attempts to articulate his pain at the loss of his family and that becomes a crucial inspiration to others, particularly Story. When Story becomes disillusioned with her ability to fulfill her role, Cleveland reassures her, “You were always meant to lead.” His writing and his ability to facilitate others in fulfilling their roles is of paramount importance in this diegesis, just as Vick’s is thought to be, since Cleveland acts as an exemplar of the archetypal audience member who reads and builds narratives out of fragmentary experience. For this reason, the making of the guild is a manifestation of Cleveland’s writing and our ability to read and become interpreters. This is precisely the reason there is so much contention built around the construction of the guild. As they come together for a second time and each of the characters fulfills a specific purpose, Cleveland looks at the cohesiveness within the disparate parts and asserts, “Everything’s right now.”

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CHAPTER 13

WHAT EVER IS *HAPPENING*
TO M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN
MEDITATION ON AN “INFECTION” FILM
MURRAY POMERANCE

Les mystères ne doivent pas être résolus, seulement traduits et retraduits sans cesse d'une langue à l'autre.

Mysteries don't have to be resolved, just endlessly translated and retranslated from one language to another.

—Emmanuel Burdeau, “Tombée de la nuit”

GERMS, GERMS, EVERYWHERE

SINCE THE EARLIEST DAYS OF THE 1950S, HOLLYWOOD HAS sure-handedly purveyed narratives about our familiar and taken-for-granted world being suddenly inhabited by lethal and invisible forces and substances—viruses, aliens, ideas, forms, gasses, toxins, brain cells. Given the unpredicted geopolitical aggressiveness of Russia in the wake of the Second World War (even the radically diminished version of it that was featured in a certain folksily arrogant joke of the time “that the Russians could not surreptitiously introduce nuclear bombs in suitcases into the United States because they had not yet been able to perfect a suitcase” [Halberstam, 25]) and the cold war that emerged thereafter, as America mobilized against communism around the world and threw itself into a frenzied program of (nuclear) arms development at home (see Halberstam, 24–48), it has hardly surprised observant scholars and critics that theaters were running

with secret diatribes against the alien Otherness that the Soviet threat continuously seemed to imply (see, for example, Biskind). The forces that crept across American borders, then, in Elia Kazan's *Panic in the Streets* (1950), Christian Nyby and Howard Hawks's *The Thing from Another World* (1951), William Cameron Menzies's *Invaders from Mars* (1953), Don Siegel's triumphantly creepy *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), or Nathan Juran's *The Brain from Planet Arous* (1957), all moved to inhabit and eat away our communities, attack the body, etiolate and weaken the healthy democratic America that had spearheaded the military victory in Europe. And in a film like Jack Arnold's *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, just as in Bert I. Gordon's *The Amazing Colossal Man* (both 1957), America's own eagerness to plunge into the nuclear age for the purposes of waging war turns back upon itself as a bleak, unrelenting threat: to the country, to the principles on which America was based, and finally, most graphically, to the body. Indeed, memory was still alive of the Nazi confrontation, and viewers could recall stunning films such as Michael Powell's *49th Parallel* (1941) in which invasive and politically "infectious" others breached our defenses (Canada, specifically, as a back door into the United States), moved among "us," aimed to pervert and twist "our" way of being in the world unless some transcendent heroic action could forestall them. In all of these films the danger—"it" or "they"—had finally dissolved into the bloodstream of everyday life, had become as American as anybody else, was moving among us, could open us or invade us body and soul while we dreamt or slept or turned our minds away (as, for example, at a movie theater while being absorbed in a film!) and would, if unfettered, convert the Good Society to an evil empire without leaving any overt traces of its action, any evidence by which it could be called to account by some suitable and powerful judgmental force, or indeed any "footprints" at all. Modernity had reached its bleakest point, with incessant circulation turned malevolent and invisible, toxic and intangible, the frightening agency of an unseen and fundamentally unknown enemy.

By contrast with fully embodied invasions, as could be seen, for example, in *This Island Earth* (1955), *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* (1956), *20 Million Miles to Earth* (1957), or the Japanese Gojira cycle—or in much later homages, such as Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks!* (1996)—"infection" stories play out onscreen with a particularly fascinating twist, the essential invisibility of the penetrating and lethal agent as contrasted ironically with the pervasive and all-demanding viscosity of the cinematic image and situation. In "infection" films, the audience "sees things" both literally—since they are staring at the screen—and colloquially, since they are concocting both protagonists and action in the pure imagination. The chord

had been anticipated by *Harvey* in 1950, although with what seemed at the time a thoroughgoing innocence and benevolence; now we had to “see” what no film viewer, and indeed none but one of the characters, could see in truth, and in this epiphany, just as in “infection” films of the science fiction or horror genre, our sight aligned us emotionally with a typically disenfranchised, ostracized, or solitary hero figure who fought to the death a malignant force that everybody around him denied.

“Infection” film is what I would call the subgenre, including the titles I have cited, because of the omnipresent suggestion that the body (a body politic, a body of cultural wisdom, and most essentially, of course, a protagonist’s [usually beautiful] personal body) has been surreptitiously invaded, and that defenses treated in some central way as “natural” and hegemonic have been outwitted, outmanned, outperformed, overrun, or bypassed. The “infection” film differs from certain other narratives that play out the myth of the Trojan Horse in that in them the locus of invasion is embodied in a more than metaphorical way; thus, to cite just one example, in Phil Alden Robinson’s *The Sum of All Fears* (2002), what is invaded is a sports stadium full of people, but the stadium is not regarded only as an embodiment of itself—it is a piece of architecture, emblematic of social and political power, much like San Francisco’s Candlestick Park, when in *Experiment in Terror* (1962) Blake Edwards shows it being taken over by a psychopathic assassin during a ball game. In “infection” films, something (or someone) gets under our skin and devours us from within, typically reconstituting a visible presence that is alien and uncontrollable, and that means to subvert or terminate the processes of conventional social life. The social body is under threat, but only because the physical body has been violated first: disease as social dysfunction.

In the decades that followed the 1950s, the theme of invasive “infection” was recapitulated again and again: the remakes of *Body Snatchers* by Philip Kaufman in 1978 (with Donald Sutherland in flight from infection), Abel Ferrara in 1993 (with Terry Kinney), and, as *The Invasion*, by Oliver Hirschbiegel in 2007 (where Nicole Kidman must, above all things, not sleep) and of *Invaders from Mars* by Tobe Hooper in 1986 (where Karen Black and the innocent young Hunter Carson are potential prey); Arthur Hill combating an unknown “infection” in Robert Wise’s *The Andromeda Strain* (1971) or Benjamin Bratt reprising that performance in a made-for-TV updating by Mikael Salomon (2008); Roddy Piper detecting hidden alien “infecters” in John Carpenter’s stunning *They Live!* (1983); Dustin Hoffman fighting a plague in Wolfgang Petersen’s *Outbreak* (1995); Vincent Price trying to survive in Ubaldo Ragona’s *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), remade by Boris Sagal with Charlton

Heston in 1971 as *The Omega Man* and by Francis Lawrence in 2007 with Will Smith as *I Am Legend*; Bruno VeSota's *The Brain Eaters* (1958), with Cornelius Keefe senatorially battling invasive infection; and, since the etiology of its central problem is finally so unknown, George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and its trailing brood; John Carpenter's *The Thing* (1982), which both clarifies and intensifies the "infection" described in Hawks and Nyby's film; two films based on John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos*, Anton Leader's *Children of the Damned* (1963) and its remake by John Carpenter, *Village of the Damned* (1995); and a number of films where the "infection" is transmitted through the bliss of wedlock: Gene Fowler Jr.'s *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958), where Gloria Talbott must swallow the fact that she is bound to Tom Tryon; Robert Michael Lewis's made-for-TV chiller *The Astronaut* (1972) with Susan Clark facing up to Monte Markham, or its double, Rand Ravich's *The Astronaut's Wife* (1999), in which Charlize Theron finds more in Johnny Depp than she bargained for.

All of M. Night Shyamalan's films have shown an obsessive concern with embodiment, and thus the potential to be concerned with infection: from the suppurating wounds in *The Sixth Sense* (1999) to the deterioration and fragmentation in *Unbreakable* (2000), the powerfully imagined (and then, at the climax, bathetically revealed) extraterrestrial anatomies in *Signs* (2002), the anxious cloaking of bodies and bodily knowledge in *The Village* (2004), and the mysteries of appearance and disappearance in *Lady in the Water* (2006). But *The Happening* (2008) is notable for taking problems and presentations of the body both further forward and further back into cultural and cinematic history than any other of his films. Politically and philosophically, when an invisible toxin of some utterly indecipherable kind invades the eastern seaboard of the United States, concentrating first on Manhattan and Philadelphia but then spreading into the Pennsylvania countryside (and, later, all the way to Paris), we are back with Siegel's body snatchers, imperceptible spores that drop out of the sky, "grow" into pods, then digest innocent humans, and finally replace them with sweetly obedient clones—the subtle distinction between whom and their originals only the "sighted" hero or his (witting or unwitting) helper is privileged to make. Siegel's film Shyamalan could have known, because it is a classic; Kaufman's remake he could have seen at the impressionable age of eight; Ferrara's, which had an especially chilling acoustical edge, came out when Shyamalan was twenty-three. Further, the filmmaker's biography on the Internet Movie Database notes that although born in India, he was raised in the "posh suburban Penn Valley area of Philadelphia"; thus, the setting of most of the action of *The Happening*, near his own home roots, in the

rural farmland between Philadelphia and Princeton, may suggest a young immigrant's reaction when he imagines his adopted country taken over by an unimaginably horrible force. In September 2001 this had all happened for real, of course, and there is no shortage of critics and viewers noting how the tragedy of 9/11 is invoked by repeated fears—articulated by a bevy of characters near the beginning of this film—that what has invaded America is a terrorist force. Whatever Shyamalan's personal politics, the film is anything but critical on this important point: it nowhere disavowed anywhere in the script that terrorism is, somehow, from somewhere, by somebody, at the root of the troubles we are witnessing. Yet, this is no *Patriot Games* (1992) or *Rendition* (2007).

What happens in this film is easy to recount if difficult to grasp. One by one, and in a terrifyingly rhythmic tattoo, mounting in numbers from the tens to the hundreds to the thousands to the hundreds of thousands, people are spontaneously killing themselves, here, there, and everywhere, with any means immediately available. Affected by some airborne "toxin," characters go into a kind of frozen trance, and then start looking for a gun, a rope, a knife, a rooftop. The small group of protagonists with whom we bond—chummy high school science teacher Elliot Moore (Mark Wahlberg); his unhappy spouse, Alma (Zooey Deschanel); his friend and colleague Julian (John Leguizamo); and Julian's daughter, Jess (Ashlyn Sanchez)—are running from the areas of "infection," where the unknown toxin is breeding and spreading, so that they can hope to be among the few who do not get contaminated, and finally our deepest and simplest wish is that in the moments to come, given that the "thing" seems to be airborne, they remain just as alive as they seem now: that, really, and nothing more. Viewers old enough to remember will hear, hauntingly, in the backs of their minds that refrain by Rado and Ragni, "The air, the air . . . / Is everywhere." In Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), the narrative problem of flight from infection was handled with more visual poetry, and more feeling for the shock of confrontation that hits us when something pretty is brought too close to something hideous, but Shyamalan has done something of greater philosophical interest that I wish briefly to explore here.

ALLEGED

In this film, death is perfunctory and circumferential, by and large affecting characters we neither know nor feel attached to and exerting a kind of centrifugal force upon the characters we care about and move with, who are systematically sucked outward away from one another and into a nebulous population of perishable strangers. Death is out there, outside, in a

kind of vacuum to which we cannot fix a specific line of attention. Michael Arlen wrote in the 1970s about what he called “the cold, bright charms of immortality” (in an article of the same name)—the pervasive and discomfiting trope of mainstream prime-time television drama that depicted death, again and again, as occurring to characters who are not central to our affiliations as viewers (in “Star Trek” parlance, one might add, the “red-shirt syndrome”) (Arlen, 73). *The Happening* generalizes and even naturalizes this trope. We see two young women on a bench in Central Park, for instance, 8:33 one morning: they are only types, not people, fair-skinned blondes, sitting to read or chat while everybody else goes to work. Suddenly it is as though for everyone on the walkways around them—more types—time has stopped. The dogs are scampering around but the people are all in a trance. Then we note that one of the two girls is withdrawn, paralyzed, frozen in time as well, as her partner looks around in mounting fear at what seem to be people clawing at themselves, children screaming. “What’s going on?” she says, with a creamy innocence that might well seem irritating, “Claire? Claire?” The friend is staring forward, holding her book. “I can’t remember what page I was on . . .” Then—quite as though to affirm that questioning doesn’t get anybody anywhere, or perhaps to demonstrate that George Orwell was right in proclaiming mind to be at the end of its tether—Claire reaches into her hair, withdraws a metallic pin the size of a small knitting needle, and plunges it into her own jugular. This is the beginning. Soon later, at a construction site on 49th Street in Manhattan, a few workers are jawing over their lunchtime sandwiches. There is suddenly the sound of a strange, jolting crunch very close by. One of them turns and sees that a body is crumpled on a sheet of plywood. He approaches to find that a coworker has fallen to his death. Gasping in shock, he turns to inform his friends, but suddenly there is a second jolting crunch. They all turn to look, and it is another coworker. But before they can move, the jolting crunch comes again. Then again. Then again and again. And bodies are raining down from the sky. We look up. Men stepping off the roof like lemmings near the sea and floating down into the camera, surreally (in a type of shot that only Shyamalan would imagine or execute). In Philadelphia, we soon learn, the same kinds of things are happening, and soon our little team of wanderers, Elliot, Alma, Julian, and Jess, find themselves huddled together in the golden atrium of 30th Street Station, on their way out of town for “safety.”

The story of the film (invasion by an “infectious” agency: the outside moving inward) is thus negated by its form (results of the “infection” being cast away from the central protagonists: the inside moving outward). And the progression of the tale is essentially an expansion, the

“infection” moving from Central Park outward until it encapsulates the Western world even as, at the same time, the experience of the “happening” is more and more clearly focused on the specific point, which is the intelligence of Elliot Moore. As he and his “family” move further and further from the problematic precincts of the city and find death wherever they go (death: that is, sharply decreasing optimism), Elliot cogitates about what the cause of this nefarious “happening” might be, wondering, indeed, to what degree discrete events might be organized in relation to one another and understood as a single, signal “event.” As a science teacher (and clearly something of a classroom guru as well), not to say a spokesman for the filmmaker, he has been emphasizing to his students the pitfalls of leaping too quickly to confining theory when we are confronted with what we don’t know. Knowledge is altogether problematic as a feature of the narrative. Aside from the utterly typical (and hopeless) inserts of apparently all-knowing, coldly informative TV news broadcasters, who purport smarmily to be in the know, it is clear that there exists as well, somewhere, an utterly significant, higher “level of knowledge” at once conceivable and unavailable, and thus that absent some access to this “holy” repository, no explanation can be given adequate to the strangeness and geographical spread of the event. Where is this supreme knowledge? It is not on the surface of the story—Elliot as he thinks about the world now or the concatenation of analyses and projections we receive from the media brain; it is not *here*; so it must be *there*: outside the precincts of the present experience, or else deep in Elliot’s mind, located where at least at present he cannot find it. Elliot is certainly beyond the militaristic yahoo who would imagine terrorists acting alone, and he has begun to formulate a theory that some kind of biological agent has affected some of the vegetation in the city parks, causing it to change its chemistry and put out an airborne toxin. Whatever the reason, meanwhile, time flies by and inexorably people are killing themselves left and right.

It is also true that each of the victims is qualified by a kind of hypernormality until the “thing,” whatever it is, takes possession of him (the normality being dramaturgically necessary so that violence can be suggested with minimal perturbation in portraiture), at which point he becomes an eager and mindless automaton whose every gaze is directed to find a handy means of death. The culture of civility becomes a death trap. The perfunctoriness of death—its detachment from dramatic action by being dramatically isolated in unseen space—makes possible a stunning synecdoche: the mere presence of the passive (dead) body onscreen speaks to an unseen (previous) moment in which a person has been invaded, and to a responsive (succeeding) moment in which this person has committed suicide. Thus,

from the point of view of a filmmaker working for intensive dramatic effect, we have the ability to film a new kind of scene, *aftermath-as-action*. Tom Cruise walking amid the rubble of a crashed airliner in Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005), for example (a set destroyed in the June 1, 2008, Universal fire), points to aftermath but not aftermath-as-action: we know that a plane crashed, but the crashing plane is not the central action of the scene or film, nor does it directly impinge on Cruise's character; it is merely decorative to the narrative purpose (and expensively decorative at that). Here, however, the dead bodies littering a country road bespeak the presence of the central diegetic threat, its malevolent activity (of whatever kind), and the social outcome of that activity, all without the camera having to show anything by way of choreographed action.

Most of the death we see in this film—and we must see or imagine a lot for the story to gain its full weight—affects strangers, but characters we have come to know cannot believably be entirely immune from infection (a strategy originated with *Psycho* [1960]). When we are close to someone who gets infected, there is a kind of subtle turning away produced by the *mise-en-scène*, a terminal modesty. For example, Julian's wife turns out to be on a separate vector, heading out to Princeton. Therefore, he must leave his daughter in Elliot's care and split off from the group in order to seek unification with her, and there comes a point when the car in which he is "safely" riding crashes into a tree and he is thrown onto the road, where he is forced to sit unprotected in the air. Quickly infected, he seizes a piece of broken glass from the pavement around him and slits his wrist, but not before Shyamalan's modest camera quickly pans and cuts back to Elliot and his group, who are safely elsewhere. Again, not only is the cause of death invisible—the unknown force motivating Julian's action—but death itself is staged as invisible through a camera that persistently avoids confronting it. Or, long after death, we see corpses from a distance and are forced to suppose the action that created them.

Oddly, then, although there is more death onscreen in *The Happening* than in most action films, it is systematically elided. One might say we have cinematic allegations of death, with bodies as evidence. And the irony is that the same can be said—indeed, we must say it—of life, as depicted in this film. Life is also alleged, and bodies evidence that, too. The unmoving bodies allege death; the moving bodies tend to allege life. As we move through the film, we breathe by shifting position from living bodies to corpses to dying bodies heard or imagined offscreen: our narrative movement and our presence—our witnessing the unfolding tale and our sense of filmic space stretching out from our point of view—constitute a way of living through the film, living forward in the narrative

in company with a small (and progressively smaller) group of people who are doing the same. As Elliot and company experience the story by surviving, we survive the “infection” ourselves by experiencing it as a story: that is, we are kept at a safe remove, but also we wend our way through the “happening” as victims cannot do (unless, of course, cinema is putting out an altogether different form of toxin).

Every time there is a new wave of suicides—over a hill we hear the sounds of gunshots—there is a vacuum invoked that we proceed to fill with our imagination, our viewer’s progress, our developing attention. It soon comes to be the case that living means moving through or moving toward death, and only this, as all conceivable evidences of projection and fulfillment—going to the movies, playing baseball, shopping for a shirt, planting a flower, writing an essay, giving a kiss—are replaced by the tense hunt through the vegetative jungle for a place to safely breathe.

MYSTIFIED

Elliot’s science lesson is about trying to conceive of a theory to account for the alarming decrease in the bee population across the United States and Europe. On the blackboard he has written a quote attributed to Albert Einstein: “If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe then man would only have four years of life left.” Invoked together, then, are ecological wisdom, apocalypse, benevolent pedagogy, the cool male role model, the teacher-student relationship, the mysteries of nature, and mass death: all themes or protothemes that will reappear and develop in the film.

While it is conventional in “infection” narratives that protagonists die off at an exponential rate as the story progresses, and conventional, too, that our emotional concern tightens and deepens for those who remain alive as this fateful progression is enacted, in this film Shyamalan causes a different formula to take effect, one most easily seen if we concentrate briefly on the outcome for Elliot, Alma, and Julian’s little girl, Jess, all three of whom survive, as it were, and come together near the end of the film to constitute a new family. Very frequently in action or adventure narratives, especially those involving horror, the supernatural, or science fiction, conflict is resolved and the story finally turned by reinitiation or reinvocation of the family structure, a symbolic marriage (as, tellingly, at the finale of the recent *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* [2008] or in the final shots of *Stagecoach* [1939]), or a symbolic adoption or childbirth or child recovery (as in *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1956]). Audiences are to interpret the rebirth of the family as a recalibration and revivification of community principles, a reason for believing—if not enthusiastically then at least wholeheartedly—that, as Paul

Goodman once said to me in conversation, “life will go on and the world will continue to support it.” Here, however, something else “happens”: climactic mystification. Elliot does live on, but not in such a way, cinematically, that it becomes meaningful for us. The family forms without joy. Alma’s problems with Elliot, whatever they were, are neither resolved nor remembered. And the little girl, who is now technically orphaned, relinquishes her dead parents as though they are little more than objects in the middle of a road, signals of events that must be presumed to have transpired but nothing more.

Then, suddenly enough, in the Jardin des Tuileries, the film seems to begin all over again. It is as though the infectious agent, having been tranquilized or having run its course in America, suddenly changes direction—can we say “changes its mind”?—and makes for a new beginning. We are to understand that the events of the film will play out again around the Seine, and then suddenly come to a halt somewhere in the French countryside—perhaps Versailles—before, presto! people start offing themselves in Hyde Park or the Parque Communal in Barcelona (beginning, perhaps, with that old man from Antonioni’s *The Passenger* [1975] who finds it so depressing that “the same old story is beginning all over again”).

As we move through the film, in other words, we come to the beginning.

What eventuates from this “finale” is a deep doubt in the viewer as to the real cause of “the happening” in the first place and a dominance of mystery over the sort of scientific rationale that leads Elliot to be so determinant about the vegetation being infected and changing its chemistry. Well, he was caught up in the middle of a catastrophe; we can forgive him. “We *don’t know*,” he had urged his teenagers to realize back in the classroom. But was this only a teaching tool, a way of breaking elegantly out of the complexities of a classroom discussion? In the “ending” of the film, however, we are led to suspect that we *don’t know, actually and for real*, which is, of course, a baffling and utterly unprecedented stance for a narration to take in its culminating moments. Culminating moments are usually about coming to clarity, finding out, realization, revelation, gaining the knowledge for which, through the passage of the story, we have sought; and a reconstituted family is above all things a new knowledge that will open onto a future world. Here, at the climax, we are baffled, not informed. What, then, have we just spent two hours watching; or better, why have we watched? Abandon even the explanation that carried you through to the penultimate moment, because in the “finale” that, too, is thrown to the wind. (And it must be said: thrown to the Parisian wind, thus picking up a historical trace that some would claim began with the Lumières and stretched unbroken until 1956, when, with Méliès in his prologue, Mike Todd went to a

70-mm format for *Around the World in Eighty Days* [see Schwartz 182]. Always Paris, to which Shyamalan loyally returns.)

More than attachment to persons, places, actions, or outcomes, then, *The Happening* leaves us with an attachment to the vacuum of the imperceptible—surely an attachment, since in order fully to realize and comprehend everything that has happened to Elliot and his world, including the “final” event (the final event we see) of which he is not yet aware, we must become wholly attached to the action of the “happening” itself, to experiencing and attempting to know and name it, whether it is an infection, indeed, at all, or something unknown, unimagined, and unimaginable. We might think of the citizens of Egypt, confronted by the ten plagues, at the moment when the plagues were inflicted; or the attitudes and explanations that could be found in Hiroshima among survivors who experienced the bomb; and, more currently, the experience of the thousands inhabiting the World Trade Center at the moment of impact: in either case, our narrative privilege makes bold and comprehensible a diegesis the protagonists of which could never understand as we do.

By way of its irresolution, its lack of cadence, *The Happening* brings us inside action itself and elaborates a structural model for any experience whatever as felt and grasped by those having it. Experience is always—until we abstract ourselves to a remote position—mystery and darkness, no matter how well illuminated; and when we are remote, we cannot properly see, even though we have luminosity, perspective, focus. *The Happening* inverts conventional filmmaking, bringing us all the way in. Perhaps it breaks with narrative. It would be a mistake to say that viewing the film is ultimately pleasurable—or to suggest that it is not unforgettable, too.

AGITATED

We surely have no firm reason at the end of *The Happening* for concluding that the cause of all the troubles here, the “agent of infection,” is nature itself, as Elliot has been supposing and as we come increasingly to believe while we spend time with him and observe his suffering and transcendence. There is more to nature than vegetation, for one thing; and infections are themselves as natural as trees. And as to vegetation: the suicides may be coming from some agency entirely more international, more global, for that matter more cosmic, than trees, hedgerows, fields, gardens, swards. Yet, it remains true that whatever powers it requires for us to withdraw from the film as we leave it behind, to think back on it, and to come to some “wild surmise,” still different powers are needed to pursue the film while it runs, to endure with it, to make it through (mentally) alive to the ending; and these powers center upon framing and enduring

the belief that Elliot is correct and that something has happened to the green world we so contemptuously take for granted, take for granted, indeed, perhaps in reflection of Baudelaire, who wrote, "I am incapable of getting worked up over plants. . . . I shall never believe that *the soul of the god inhabits plant-life*, and even if it did, I shouldn't worry much about it" (104). Our green life has begun to rot, green thought has been stymied or fractured in the green shade; say, the kingdom has become arid, the Grail has been lost, our social and cultural coherence has been fragmented. And as we bring ourselves to move—with a supreme diegetic irony—away from the city (and its parks) and into what we presume will be safer haven in the countryside, we are actually throwing ourselves more and more irrevocably into the nexus of the horror.

As in *Heart of Darkness*, then, not civilization itself but what civilization has wrought upon the wilderness is what we must come to fear, since the wilderness is apparently now getting its own back. And, to repeat a last time, if this *cauchemar* vision or imagination is, in the end, only something we must pass through in order to come to the *real* ending, which is greater and ineffable in its intangibility, still the retribution of the forests is the vision or imagination that haunts us through, and after, the voyage that is this film. Finally, in the Pennsylvania countryside he knows so well, Shyamalan stimulates and terrifies us with shots that are elegant and deceptive in their abject simplicity: a massive old tree, with the wind blowing through its leaves; a field of tall grass, with the wind rippling across it; leaves blowing across our faces; a shining meadow, all golden green, with Elliot and his little "family" racing across it as though it is the pit of hell. All of this—we now agree to believe, because Shyamalan's diegesis has proposed that we should—can "infect," can pollute, can infiltrate and devour, now that it has gone to war against us. And to make this visible onscreen, nothing needs to be set up but a camera on a tripod on a pleasant summer's day. The very wind is our central character, our villainous harbinger of darkness.

The essence of the film, then, is landscape, and its form the landscape shot, sometimes recalling Franco Fontana, sometimes Dorothea Lange, sometimes Ansel Adams, sometimes Eugène Atget. But instead of retiring modestly and silently, as in the work of these artists, the trees and fields present themselves aggressively, protrude, militate, all because of what we conceive them to be.

"We must indeed deny to plants the qualities of a soul," the sociologist and philosopher Max Scheler wrote in 1928:

The vital feeling of the plant is oriented toward its medium, toward the growing into this medium in accordance with certain directions like

“above” and “below,” toward the light or toward the earth, but only toward the undifferentiated whole of these directions. . . . The plant shows very clearly that life is not “will to power,” as Nietzsche thought, but that the essential drive of all living things is toward reproduction and death. . . . We do not find in the plant world the dual principle essential for all animals living in groups, the principle of pioneering and following, of setting an example and imitating. (9–12)

Trees do not have the capacity to imagine, to perceive, to denote, to respond intentionally to specific eventful stimuli, to plan an attack, to organize with other trees around the countryside in order to engage humans in unison, and so on (J. R. R. Tolkien and his Ents notwithstanding); or at least one of our signal minds has suggested plainly that this is the case. But what if Scheler is wrong, since, in the end, he is no tree himself and can only surmise through those two restrictive rituals of science, patterned observation and rational thought? The spiritualism of Shyamalan always requires that we bring doubt to rationality, and that we acknowledge that the patterns of our observation are arbitrary and porous. And even if we should agree with Scheler, still, what if some “infection”—coming from who knows what source—can have the indeterminate (call it magical) power to change the constitution of the plant world’s inner structure, to convert the forest?

We are partly in the world of dreams here, the world of *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Return of the King* and *Silly Symphonies*, we are in Narnia, in an oneiric state where leaves and bark and branches have consciousness of a sort we can only invent, that is, consciousness that becomes evident to us only when our rationality is suspended. “Sleep,” Scheler admitted, “is a relatively plant-like state in man” (14). Perhaps in sleep, the chlorophyllic world can overtake us—and we see it. From this point of view, what is most alarming about *The Happening* is that virtually none of it takes place in the dark, that it celebrates the lambency of brightly lit, airy, daytime vistas in a kind of full-bodied *plein air* impressionism reminiscent of the painting of Monet and Pissarro. We awake to the danger of the trees in our dream, but we are dreaming while we are awake!

Given the new vital diegetic power of the wind, it is stagnancy, finally, that becomes the cure. In a quaint little fairytale farmhouse, whose barmy owner (Betty Buckley) lectures Elliot and harangues him, then bashes herself to death against a windowpane, Elliot, Jess, and Alma keep silent and still in the stony rooms, staring out at the windswept trees, taking no action, hesitating even to breathe, until finally, finally it becomes clear, unmistakably but also inexplicably, that the storm of “infection” has passed, the chemistry is changed back again, the trees are only trees

and one can walk beneath them without fear. One is brought to recall the plague of locusts in Sidney Franklin's *The Good Earth* (1937), photographed with the same loving-kindness we see in *The Happening*, but in black and white, by the great Karl Freund: there, however, humans race out to save their fields, rather than holing up against the storm, and in the end it is not apparently their action but the wondrous (and cooperative) power of the wind that blows the grasshoppers away and saves their civilization. Does the wind blow, however, *because* the farmers went out to encounter their enemy? Here, the blowing wind was itself the enemy, and in a breath it is gone; in a breath the trees and bushes are benign again. Benignly green, I should add, and brilliantly in the thousand greens that are always complementary (a kind of homage to Elsie de Wolfe, decorator to the stars, who wanted everything green), just as earlier the world had been a green malignancy, a green threat, everything everywhere a Wicked Witch of the West.

But always, if the infection itself is "dead," the trees who were its agents are not, since they shudder and wave, always in agitation. Agitation is action (literally), and action is life. I continue to see Shyamalan's leaves shuddering in those trees, months and months after having watched the film, and other leaves in other trees, even watching old films on television. If Elliot has been proven wrong at the end; if it was not the trees; if it was something we did not know and will perhaps never know, because we cannot know the source of a situation we are in; if the cause of death is always only life; then where can we be safe, where can we look for the true cure—since even in tranquility we will surely perish? The images of this film are like shuddering leaves, perfunctory and mysterious and unendingly agitated, even pronounced in their agitation: but this is also, wonderfully, true of film itself. Not only films about shuddering leaves, films like *The Happening*, or even films such as *The Hurricane* (1937)—where in the glare of night the silver wind brushes through the coconut palms while pale-cheeked Aubrey Smith looks on—but all films, films about anything, films that flicker and move forward always. Finally we must wonder whether the "happening" in *The Happening* is film itself, and whether, perhaps, it is finally film, quite as much as anything, that has "infected" us.

POSTSCRIPT

The trees had been innocent before the pedagogical (narrative) voice suggested otherwise. (Commenting about *Strangers on a Train* [1951], Shyamalan notes with admiration Hitchcock's "ability to do plot and character at the same time," whereas most filmmakers introduce characters first; in this film, he follows the master dutifully, since the idea of the

film—what we don't know about our world is more powerful than what we do—is something we encounter at the same time as we meet Elliot in his classroom.) We opened in Central Park with a blithe focus on two girls on a bench, persisting in taking for granted all the greenery around them; the park itself was in these first moments only a neutral setting in which human agency could have full play, not a force—prototypical, aboriginal, outside the frame, as it were, even though always before the lens. Then, through various enunciations—"trees, plants . . . changing chemistry . . . toxins, toxicity, death"—the idea took breath that there in the greenery was not passive décor but agency itself. "I don't like them," said Madeleine Elster of the California redwoods in *Vertigo* (1958), and then, swept away by the spirit that is possessing her, the vanquished Carlotta Valdes, she points at the rings of a model cross section hanging for display and whispers, "Here I was born . . . here I died . . . and you took no notice"—quite as though the tree *could have* and *might have* taken notice had it not been so antagonistic or so unsympathetic. The word made us reexamine the forest. Early in *The Happening*, Shyamalan has some mindless fearful citizens point to "terrorists": any liberal will quickly stand up to point out the foolhardiness of that, but who stands up for trees once Elliot begins to denounce them? As a locus of attribution, dramaturgically "trees" works so much more powerfully than "terrorists," is more ambiguous, harder to disbelieve. But always there is invocation, and our "knowledge" and "realization" flow from it.

The trees had been innocent, and then they were labeled in a kind of binding proclamation, and then they became what we called them, the source of trouble, the poison. Then, of course, the world began to evidence our understanding (we found exactly what we searched for): outside Princeton a gang of men had hanged themselves from the roadside trees; as, quickly passing beneath, we gaze up at them, they are first like evil fruit and then, suddenly, like scabs definitively indexing an infection. Even when the "change" occurs and the trees return to normal, they are labeled in retrospect, agents now becalmed that caused all the damage before, beauties we had better begin to watch with care. Not the vegetative world, then, but our way of labeling it, our pronunciation, our deft and relentless theorizing bring the problem into focus, perhaps constitute the problem as we know it. Before the theory we had only the happening. It played out, and we had only to experience and fear it.

Fear? Fear above all. Shyamalan has always played on fear to sell tickets, although any device would have worked—a plague of kissing or hugging, people around the world suddenly spouting poetry. But fear is more memorable, better for establishing a filmmaker's reputation. *The Happening* is

an ontological horror: the search for causation and the aggravation are one and the same. As Kafka had it, "He who seeks does not find." And the real danger begins when we believe our search is over.

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