

# Being true

By Martina Nagel

**M**y sixth sense tells me that great writing is about being true to oneself.

On M. Night Shyamalan's 29th birthday, Disney released their new psychological horror film, *The Sixth Sense*. *Runaway Bride* with Julia Roberts had opened a week before and *The Blair Witch Project* expanded its success with the film-makers' pictures on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines. To everyone's surprise *The Sixth Sense* overtook both hits and by the third week in September had grossed more than \$213 million in the United States making it the top earner of summer 1999. The film went on to receive six Academy Award nominations and with a worldwide gross exceeding \$670 million, *The Sixth Sense* has become the 9th highest grossing film of all time.

Disney paid Shyamalan \$3 million for the screenplay, a record of sorts in recent Hollywood deal-making, and agreed to allow the 28-year-old to direct the movie. When Bruce Willis signed up to play the part of Malcolm Crow, the studio increased the budget from \$10 million to \$40 million.

'I told them I wanted Bruce Willis to play the psychologist. They sent it to him on a

Friday and he sent word that he wanted to meet me the following Monday. I was terrified to meet Bruce, but the moment he walked in the room he put me at ease because he gave me a big hug. It was the endorsement everyone, including me, needed. By just reading the script, Bruce knew that I was cooked and ready to be taken out of the oven. He was the first to really recognize that.' (*Calgary Sun*, 18 November 2000)

Although it is all in the writing, Shyamalan has good advice: 'I had to believe that success was more about what you know than who you know because I was just a guy from Philadelphia whose parents were Indian doctors. I didn't really have any connections. But you really have to protect yourself. You can write the greatest script, and they'll tell you [they'll] let you direct and all you have to do is get Tom Cruise to be in the movie. Of course, Tom says no, and that's how they trick you out of directing it.' (*The Unguarded Heart*, March 2000 issue of *Written By*)

As a child Shyamalan aspired to greatness. He envied the prodigy dream of young child actors and musicians which America commercialises so well, not realising that only a prodigy would produce 45 short films on an 8mm camera by the time he was sixteen years old. When his obsession determined his education and he told his parents he wanted to study film at the Tisch School of the Arts in New York, the two doctors were rather disconnected with their son's dream: 'What, they teach film?! Didn't know you could teach film. Is that a real college?'

His parents' concern was by no means inappropriate. By the time Shyamalan was in his mid twenties he had completed nine feature-length screenplays and had directed two unsuccessful movies that earned him devastating reviews, and it hurt them deeply to see their hard-working son barely making a living.

On the other hand, they did enjoy finally seeing their son star in, direct, produce and write his second movie *Wide Awake*, which cost Miramax \$750,000 and was stuck in post-production purgatory for two years. 'To them it was almost autobiographical, because I went to a Catholic school (the same one as we shot in the film), the parents in the movie were both doctors, and the sister's name in the film is Neena, my sister's name is Veena. The story was so real, my parents were laughing at all the little things that I put in there, [like] falling asleep when I was brushing my teeth. They got such a kick out of all that.'

The influential film critic Stephen Holden from the *New York Times* cremated Shyamalan's young work. However, his review made a deep impact on Shyamalan who heroically transformed the offence into one of the deepest and most effective insights into film-making in Hollywood. 'What I took from it over time was: as a film-maker, you can't go under the assumption that the audience, whoever they are, are coming from the same emotional



So how do you pronounce Shyamalan?

The Sixth Sense: BVI

# to yourself



Signs: BVI

## Circular narrative

place as you, or the same value system as you, or the same anything as you. So if that's what you want to portray, you have an onus on you to build that through the film, to get to that point through the film, in the assumption that, everyone's not as spiritual as me, everyone doesn't see the end as always a happy ending, that everything is good, and that there always is meaning. They don't come from that.

'Some people have had some really, really legitimately crappy lives and feel blasé about everything. And so how do you talk to them, how do you say, "We're going to create a world. Now what filmic things, and language, and things that I can do with the writing, what can I do to bring that person closer to the feeling that I have?" And so

thereby get it on the screen, but also to have respect for everybody, and not go under the assumption that if I'm crying because I wrote this scene, then clearly everyone else will be crying. Well, there's a whole bunch of people who will [cry], but there's a lot of people that you've offended, because they say, "We don't attach that much [significance] to our moms, because our mom wasn't there for us. So you gotta tell me why I need to feel for this particular mom, not go under the assumption that you feel for moms because everyone feels for their mom, right? That's not true, you can't skip those ABCs.

'And so I take responsibility and hopefully will use it on *The Sixth Sense* to go, "This is why this child and this mom are so special." It's small, small things. But don't go under

the assumption that because a mom is crying in a car at the end of the movie, that everyone is going to be crying. I have to give you the reasons why—even the smallest of things. Overhearing her when she's talking in her sleep, and she says [about her son], "If somebody tries to hurt you I'm going to kick their asses", that little funny thing, which the crowd laughs at, it's endearing, and you go, "Even in this woman's sleep, she's a lioness, and she's ready to protect her child." And when she cries, when she breaks, you say, "Oh my God."

'So I gave you the reasons of this particular person in this particular world with this particular life, and I didn't make it all perfect, and at the end of the movie I tried to get you to the same place, which is, "Isn't it ▶

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great to have the love of a mom?" And maybe if I'd started with that, Stephen Holden would have still hated *Wide Awake*. But with *The Sixth Sense*, I brought people to that place. And I'm learning to do that more and more." (*Creative Screenwriting*, October/November Issue 2000)

But before Shyamalan arrived at this place of perfect communication between the audience and the film-maker, he had to work his way through endless drafts and make many hard decisions ranging from the choice of genre to the identity of his main characters.

'I didn't want [critic] Steven Holden of the *New York Times* to hold my destiny, and he does with a lot of small films. So I decided I was going to write the greatest script, and everything was going to change. It's going to be mine, and they'll have to let me direct it because they won't get it any other way. I also had this fear that I was not supposed to do this, not supposed to succeed. But I was pissed. So I just wrote and wrote. The first draft was bad, so I threw it out and started again on page one. Second draft, the same thing. I threw it out, page one again. It started out as a movie about a serial killer with Malcolm as a crime photographer. Then I realized it was me doing *The Silence of the Lambs* [screenplay by Ted Tally based on the novel by Thomas Harris]. It wasn't until about the fifth draft that I really began to figure it out. It was then that I realized that at the end he realizes he's dead. It took me five more drafts to execute it right.'

There were ten drafts for *The Sixth Sense*. Shyamalan displays a few of them bound in leather in a glass case in his office. When he is working at new scripts and feels sorry for himself, a glance at the display helps him remember that hard work – writing draft upon draft – is part of the scriptwriting bargain. In the course of creating numerous outlines, a first draft and many rewrites of *The Sixth Sense*, Shyamalan often reported to his agents that the work in progress was a terrible mess. He meant it.

'I hated every second of it,' he says about the rewriting of *The Sixth Sense*, 'and that meant that I had a lot to learn about writing. I had realized that *Wide Awake* had been too

earnest, too openly optimistic. A movie is like a date with an audience. You don't want to reveal too much emotion too fast. They'll say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down."

Shyamalan did slow down. The pace of his movie is incredibly subtle, so much so that studio executives panicked at the thought of having a slow movie. But Shyamalan deliberately focused more on details and created the time to allow the finer trivia to resonate with the viewer. It takes a great deal of stamina to stay away from million-dollar special effects, especially if you are dwelling in the grounds of the Horror genre. Instead Shyamalan relied on the emotional and terrifying power of his story that originates in the psychology of his characters. He clothed their story with an eerie pace and produced a ghostly aura. 'A guy is not scared of blood spurting out of a mouth, it's a spectacle,' Shyamalan says. 'It should touch a chord with people.'

From the outset *The Sixth Sense* carries all the connotations of the classical horror movie. A violent prologue opens the film that serves as the harbinger of the psychological torture and destruction that is to follow. Skilfully Shyamalan uses the iconography of being naked and the location of the bathroom that are used in so many classic horror settings. The audience know that one of the key rules of the Horror genre is that the victim has to avoid bathrooms, showers or toilets ... anywhere he will be naked or semi-naked. Later, at a vital turning point of the film, Shyamalan returns to these dramatic elements when Cole hurries to the bathroom at night and for the first time the audience encounters a visible ghost on screen.

Parts of *The Sixth Sense* were shot in a church; ghostly spirits dominate the story and the young boy who sees them employs Christian icons as part of his defence.

With the engagement of ghosts, Shyamalan introduces the dramatic device

that lives at the heart of every horror film, the monster. Over the years the personification of this monster has changed from King Kong to Hannibal, from the monster being out there and an alien species, to the monster being in our midst and one of us. However, the characteristic of the embodiment of evil has never left this creature and also takes its expression in *The Sixth Sense*. The ghosts heartlessly instigate fear and suffering upon an innocent child with their constant appearances.

Shyamalan succeeds in keeping the ghosts off-screen for the first half of the movie. The audience only glimpse their presence in the reaction of the terrified child. The film-maker's recognition and expression of this formidable feeling of terror is extremely sensitive: the mark of Cole's sweaty hands on the kitchen table, a patch of grey hair at the back of Cole's head, a haunted posture as Cole hurries down the alley to the church. With every concealment of the ghosts, Shyamalan delays the reaction shot of the screaming face which features in 'B' horror films.

The ghosts' vicious attempts to infest the boy's life seem apparently irrational, ongoing and endless. Now that the boy has confided in his psychologist about the ghosts' existence, he has to set out on a journey to overcome them. The climax involves the boy in a drawn out confrontation with a ghost in which, against all the odds, he overcomes his blind terror and actually starts communicating with them, offering his help to end their own terror.

Though *The Sixth Sense* is a genre film, it is also remarkably original with an idiosyncratic point of view that takes it beyond being a formulaic ghost story. 'I guess my take on this stuff is not just to make scares, but to kind of open you up emotionally so you can have a real cathartic experience.'

It is this connection with the audience that makes *The Sixth Sense* a particularly captivating and absorbing film. The screenplay is completely character-driven and relies on one basic emotion, fear. With the development of strongly layered characters, Shyamalan moves the horror of his story away from mere spectacle and mindless terror to genuine emotion and

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meaning. As a film-maker he displays a deep understanding of human nature and psychology, especially that of children. With the help of his little protagonist, Shyamalan plumbs the depths of what it means to be human.

'For me, when I was a kid, I always felt I had these thoughts – literally – that I felt too much, that I thought more than everyone else; that somehow I knew what everyone else was feeling, and it was too much awareness, it was overload. I remember feeling that clearly. An obvious example would be when you first dance and you're ten years old and the guys ask girls to dance. And they either get "Yes, yes," and they go and dance, or they get "No," and they come back and say, "Whatever". But if I went to ask a girl to dance – let's say she said "Yes" – I could tell that she really felt "No" and was feeling embarrassed that this little Indian kid came and asked and her friends were and it would feel like they were all screaming this stuff at me, but they weren't saying anything. And it would kill me, and I'd want to run crying from the room even though she said, "Yes!" But it didn't feel like anybody else registered at that level. It was too overwhelming a feeling. And that's the thing I tried to put in with Cole, is that he is a hypersensitive individual, and that at that age being hypersensitive is a gift and a curse.' (*Creative Screenwriting*, October/November Issue 2000)

Besides reaching deep into his soul and imparting his childhood sensitivity to Cole, Shyamalan believes that a writer must have something to say about our culture. Shyamalan desires to affect how people think and what they value. If you look at *The Sixth Sense* in that respect, it is easy to see the deep, thematic focus of the picture: people who have been disconnected. In this rather isolated and vulnerable position, Shyamalan throws them into the deep end of the emotional pool. Enormous pressure weighs upon this little family and the mother's honest concern for her son's deteriorating condition makes these pressures even more unacceptable than if she were a slut or alcoholic who could not care less about her child. Here are two people who obviously belong to one another, they truly want to connect with each other, but are blocked by the inexpressible, unthinkable and the inexplicable.

In *The Sixth Sense* the theme expands into communication. Cole is afraid that his mother will break under the reality of what he experiences so he decides to carry the



Signs: BVI

The twist is in the bag.

burden of his secret on his own. Early in the movie Cole explains his notion: "We were supposed to draw a picture, anything we wanted. I drew a man. He got hurt in the neck by another man with a screwdriver. Everyone was upset. They had a meeting. Mum started crying. I don't draw like that any more."

Cole's story ends with him sharing his secret with his mother. Malcolm and his wife Anna do not talk to each other except in the first scene. Malcolm tries to communicate with her but they seem to miss each other. When he finally gets through to her, it is in her sleep, which brings about the revelation that he himself is a ghost.

'I'm challenged by limitations,' says Shyamalan. 'I enjoy having to work out the problems, like the idea of Bruce Willis never speaking to anyone but Haley Joel (Cole) in *The Sixth Sense*.' Even the dead in this story seek to communicate. They are haunted by the unsaid, by unfinished tasks and revelations and they scrape the earth for a channel through which to contact the visible world.

Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* complies with all the basic rules and has the features of the classic Horror genre except for one particular sequence where Shyamalan breaks an essential rule of horror film-making, which in my view is not to the story's advantage.

In classic Horror, the monster's motivation is territorial and almost always personal, wreaking vengeance for an earlier wrong perpetrated by another person. When Cole tries to overcome his inner demons of fear and addresses a ghost in the body of a young woman, the story seems disconnected and not tied to the family life of Lynn and Cole that the viewer has

learned to value and care for.

I was hoping that the ghost confronted would be the grandmother and that the threat that runs through the film of the missing bumblebee pendant would find its visual climax in the scene with her and the boy. As tearful and moving as the ending of the film was, with mother and son being reunited, the words would have been emotionally more loaded and meaningful if we had seen the grandmother's agony and torrent of pain that is passed on to the mother and finally resolved by the little boy's brave and communicative words.

Nevertheless, Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* has carved out a unique niche in the realm of the Horror genre and contributed to the genre's ongoing evolution. If Shyamalan had stopped making films after this success, the scene from *The Sixth Sense* where the disturbed little boy says "I see dead people" would be etched forever in movie lovers' minds.

'The box office isn't what makes *The Sixth Sense* a success, although it's important. It's affecting people, affecting the culture. The people who make *The Simpsons* sent me a clip from the opening of their show. Bart's writing, "I can't see dead people. I can't see dead people on the blackboard." Things like that make me feel the film was a success.'

Martina Nagel lectures at the Northern Film School and has frequently been invited to speak at ICVM, the independent film conference in LA and at BAFTA in London. She is currently completing her PhD on film genre at a German university. She is a co-founder with Bart Gavigan of script clinics that have attracted Hollywood film-makers and European writers. Tel: 01372 844484