Imposition to Sight: Visual Technique in M. Night Shyamalan’s Signs
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Filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan rose to prominence in the late nineties crafting thoughtful, psychological portraits of characters on the fringes of the supernatural, but his filmography has garnered an increasingly divisive relationship with critics and audiences over the past two decades (Foundas 2013). Shyamalan’s Signs (2002) initially debuted to mixed reviews and has largely been ignored in the general discourse of film criticism. While at times Signs can be a clunky, overly-stylized film with rigid dialogue that borders on stilted, it is simultaneously a thrilling family drama buried within the Sci-Fi alien invasion genre. Signs features richly cinematic visual sequences, and as filmmakers tend to establish a film’s stylistic techniques and motifs within the first act, this analysis will largely focus on the opening sequence of the film. I will contend that Shyamalan understands the signs and signifiers of suspense in visual storytelling and that Signs employs the motif of hindered sight to wonderful effect by synthesizing a subjective, spectatorial experience.

Signs begins in silence – a lone, discordant violin cues the fade-in of a single directional light source. This orb of light gradates into darkness at the edges of the frame and contrasts against the stark black credits. The elegiac violin resonates in time, rhythmically, with the dynamic light source dimming as a dying flashlight would. This title sequence (Fig. 1) is a consistent barrage of alternating light and dark – a self-reflexive reminder of film projection. Ultimately, the opening imagery presented by Shyamalan in the first few scenes of Signs establishes the film’s motif and develops the theme of light versus dark. Light, here – and commonly, in art and literature – signifies the dawning knowledge and understanding that comes from learning (enlightenment), which is a well-trod theme reaching as far back as Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. Narratively, Signs’ principal characters have to reconcile the impossible in a diegesis.

Fig. 1: The opening title establishes the light versus dark theme.
that posits a world where malevolent aliens invade Earth. As James Newton Howard’s score crescendos into a Bernard Herrmann-inspired symphony, Shyamalan plays with the audience’s expectations like Hitchcock plays his proverbial piano.

Narratively, *Signs* adheres very closely to the goal-oriented structure of Classical Hollywood Cinema (Bordwell 107). The film’s protagonist, Reverend Graham Hess, has abolished his belief in God after a terrible accident left his wife dead. Hess lives on acres of farmland with his brother Merrill, a failed professional baseball player, and his two precocious children. The events that transpire in the film challenge Graham to rise to the role of protector and seek closure to the grief that ails him. However, in a purely stylistic approach – divorcing the narrative, momentarily – Shyamalan plays with tropes that do not present images clearly for the sake of spectator understanding. In this way, the film occasionally subverts the continuity editing tenets that dictate the clarity of story as the salient aspect of Classical Hollywood structure. Instead, Shyamalan often works to design shots and compositions that intentionally hinder the viewing of key elements. He deliberately chooses spatial relationships that challenge or outright deny a full understanding of the clear picture.

At the start of the film, Merrill startles awake alone in the darkened bedroom. He tours the house, completing rounds like a security guard, and Shyamalan’s manipulation of mise-en-scène adds layers to the storytelling through an abundance of impactful visuals. The opening sequence is wordless and scoreless allowing the ambient sound of his brother Graham’s wake-up routine to lull the audience into makeshift calm. The sparse sounds of Graham’s footsteps and breathing emphasize his alienation. The walls are worn and grey and there is an overall lack of warm light. The farmhouse does not strike spectators as being particularly inviting from these early scenes. The most telling shot is a static that frames the bathroom doorway just left of centre (Fig. 2). The frame is devoid of human figures (the audio track features the sound of Graham urinating offscreen). The emptiness of the frame leads the

![Fig. 2: Quiet morning in the Hess house; there is an indication of a crucifix having been removed from wall.](image-url)
viewer to scan the composition for salient information: why is Shyamalan lingering on this moment? Careful viewers will observe the subtle discoloration on the wall in the shape of a crucifix that had once hung in place.

A piercing scream cuts through the somber opening. Graham and Merrill tear outside, and for the first time, dialogue is spoken, sparsely. Merrill asks, “Where are they?” The loaded question alludes to a lot more than just the missing children. The Hess children scream from deep within the cornfields and the men charge after them through towering stalks. Graham eventually finds his son staring off into the distance (Fig. 3). There is no point-of-view shot to orient us to the object of his gaze. They speak to each other without making eye contact; this is another component of the motif on broken sight-lines. Many conversations within Signs occur with a significant lack of eye contact between the conversing parties. This technique is off-putting, since these characters are consistently addressing offscreen space and thereby violating the audience’s ability to utilize eye-line matching techniques for clear spatial organization. Additionally, because of the lack of eye contact, communication slows, as does the pace of the drama. The characters speak methodically; they choose their words carefully. Something else in off-screen space is often vying for their attention. The boy points, his father follows, and slowly Shyamalan’s camera tracks backwards through the stalks until spilling out into a large area of trampled corn.

For the duration of this particular scene, Shyamalan resists providing an establishing shot. Spectators are subjected to a series of close-ups edited at a glacial pace. Viewers focus on the wandering eyes of Graham Hess as dogs bark ferociously in the background, ratcheting up the tension. His boots crunch softly on the corn. Finally, the camera tracks backwards into a very long shot that foregrounds two German Shepherds barking at the sky. Finally, Shyamalan presents us with a bird’s-eye-view of the crop-circle. For the first time, viewers get a clear sense of space observing the majesty of the near-perfect circle trampled in the middle of a cornfield. The family stands in the centre, walled-in and helpless, and the journey of exploration begins (Fig. 4).

Throughout Signs there are a number of obstacles that prevent both characters and spectators from
fully seeing the clear picture. This denial of visual material inhibits character growth and also fundamentally enhances the suspense of the film by further delaying the resolution of expectations. Corn mazes, flashlight beams in darkness, television static, children at a birthday party on a home video, Graham struggling to see what is on the other side of a pantry door: all of these moments underpin major sequences throughout the film where vision is impaired and the corresponding knowledge to be gained is withheld briefly. Additionally, Shyamalan frames *Signs* with intermingled flashbacks to the night of the accident that claimed the life of Graham’s wife. Interestingly, the flashback presented to viewers is the same each time, but grows clearer to the viewer as each subsequent “pass” fills in more information. Scholar Michael Sofair writes that these flashbacks are to be “explained as distortions appearing to, if not produced by, Graham’s confused perspective” (56). I would argue further that his inability to find catharsis drives Shyamalan’s decision to deprive spectators of this information via the film’s formal organization, which inspires great subjectivity.

In his seminal text, *The Imaginary Signifier* (apropos for a film called *Signs*), Christian Metz writes:

…the point is to gamble simultaneously on the excitation of desire and its non-fulfilment (which is its opposite and yet favours it), by the infinite variations made possible precisely by the studios’ technique on the exact emplacement of the boundary that bars the look, that puts an end to the ‘seen’, that inaugurates the downward (or upward) tilt into the dark, towards the unseen, the guessed-at. The frame and its displacements (that determine the emplacement) are in themselves forms of ‘suspense’… (77)

Here Metz makes a case for how erotic subject matter is handled in studio films, but the techniques described lend themselves to how Shyamalan designs the visual structure of *Signs*. By imposing deliberate obstacles to sight lines – for viewers and characters
within the diegesis – he synthesizes a gesturing towards the unseen and generates significant suspense.

Shyamalan’s opening sequence introduces the film expertly. It conveys the sense of fear and mystery that will drive the central narrative. Shyamalan develops the core story through visual cues rather than using dialogue to push it forward. Along the way, Signs will have moments of goosebump-inducing terror (the climax in the darkened basement as Merrill’s son suffers a debilitating asthma attack) and moments that border on laughable (“Swing Away, Merrill”). Still, when writers or directors are as focused on utilizing the visual elements of film form to generate meaning in their pictures as M. Night Shyamalan, it becomes a pleasurable experience to unpack a film’s layers and deepen our understanding of its complexity.

Works Cited


