

# Analyze This

Dir: Harold Ramis, USA, 1999

## A review by George Larke, University of Sunderland

It's parody time again for the gangster genre. Just in case we were tempted into taking the films too seriously, we are reminded that the cinematic gangster and his surroundings are essentially cliché forms. *Analyze This*, directed by Harold Ramis and starring Robert De Niro and Billy Crystal, takes the post-classical fashion of masculine angst popular in the gangster film from *The Godfather* (1972) to *Donnie Brasco* (1995) and mercilessly laughs at it. Ramis, who previously directed another comedy success, *Groundhog Day* (1993), wrote the script along with Peter Tolan and Kenneth Lonergan. At first glance, the film invites comparison to another gangster parody, *Mad Dog and Glory* (1993) wherein De Niro played against type, as the "nobody" schmuck, while Bill Murray played the mobster. That film did not work very well. De Niro cannot play the schmuck opposite a comedy gangster it stretches imagination and parody too far. For *Analyze This*, switching the roles and replacing Murray with Billy Crystal has produced a more fitting character balance.

Mob boss, Paul Vitti (De Niro), is suffering from a severe case of "work-related stress". The biggest meeting of New York crime bosses since the Appalachian gathering of 1957 is imminent. He's just witnessed the assassination of one of his best friends and certain associates are suggesting he was involved in ordering it. The panic attacks are getting worse and it's affecting his work in a set-piece interrogation and assassination scene he cannot pull the trigger, much to his henchman's and, more pointedly, the victim's disgust. Help arrives in the form of psychiatrist, Dr Ben Sobel (Crystal). After a minor car accident, Sobel leaves his card with Vitti's associate, Jelly (Joe Viterelli); and Jelly gives the card to Vitti. At this point the primary theme takes over and we are treated to an array of scenarios involving the mobster learning to express himself in other ways than violence, while the psychiatrist gets to play act some classic gangster moments.

One of the best uses of De Niro's talents is the delicate balance between comedy and menace. He is basically re-enacting his role as Jimmy Conway in *Goodfellas* (1990). However, that the compliment "You have a gift my friend. You do, you do, you do!" turns almost to a threat when Sobel refuses to accept it, is also reminiscent of Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*) - another man in need of counselling. While *Analyze This* is a comedy, Vitti remains a threatening and unpredictable character. When asked to take out his aggression on a pillow, he blasts it repeatedly with his gun he may have lost the taste for pre-planned executions, but the gun is still his preferred expression of anger.

Violence, or the threat of it is, in fact, the main source of comedy. Thus, the use of certain set-piece executions, (including the body in the trunk from *Goodfellas*), means that we may be laughing at the images we usually like the least in a gangster film. While Sobel is too worried for his life to offer much critique of the Mafia early on, his fiancée Laura (Lisa Kudrow) has no such fears; neither does his son. Between them they provide two stereotypical "outsider" responses to Mafia indignation from Laura and wide-eyed fascination

from Michael (Kyle Sabihy). Both deliver good lines with the necessary understatement and contribute to the general comic dilution of a violent subject. However, neither are allowed to participate much in what is essentially a two-man show.

Having said that, Vitti's henchmen, especially Jelly, are perhaps the best characters in the film. As most actors are veterans of the gangster film, they can carry self-parody without losing face - almost as if they earn the right through association with the serious stuff. Jelly plays the loyal henchman to perfection, he doesn't ask questions and he doesn't judge. He looks the part, as do all the Mafia characters, in their silk suits and heavy jewellery. Most don't need to say, or do anything in particular to contribute to the general air of confident stereotype that permeates nearly every Mafia scene.

Unfortunately, in parodies there is always the primary "outsider", who ends up operating inside the organisation in some way (Matthew Broderick in *The Freshman*, Hugh Grant in *Mickey Blue Eyes*). Ben Sobel is well played by Billy Crystal, but his function eventually seems to be to "play" at being the mobster. He gets respect as Vitti's adviser. He poses as Vitti's consigliere in the grand meeting of the New York families, getting to spout some Italian mobster clichés. Then finally he gets to participate in a shoot-out, while remaining the hero in the eyes of the law; Vitti, the true mobster, goes to jail. This may seem petty, as Sobel has not exactly "asked" for this attention. However, his participation can never be more than simple two-dimensional parody. In comparison, Vitti's dream the assassination attempt on Don Corleone from *The Godfather* has Vitti playing Fredo's role. Not only does this expert use of intertextuality provide the key to Vitti's neurosis, but it also refers to the popular assertion that "real life" gangsters love to watch gangster films. It is no wonder then, that Vitti's subconscious fears should present themselves in this form. It is still parody, but it shows an understanding from the film-makers of the impact of the Mafia as a cultural myth. The joke is in the fact that the Mafia remains such an enigma that even "real life" gangsters may look to cinema for their role models.

The film could be said to act as a kind of temporary therapy for gangster fans. To have your favourite brutal gangster cliché re-scripted as comedy somehow takes away the guilt at having enjoyed it the first time round. Gangster films are becoming much too serious, the distinction between fact and fiction too blurred. Ordinary "schmucks" might start to believe it all! Parody allows us to pigeon-hole the gangster film back into the comforting notion of pure fictional genre (albeit temporarily). For some of us, this is one of the disappointing aspects of parody, as genre tends to reduce its players to stereotypes - whereas the true fascination of gangster films is found when real humans are shown to be lurking beneath all the violent posturing.

One of the best things to come out of *Analyze This* is the television series *The Sopranos*. Even though the film has only just been released in the UK, it was released in America before the TV series began. The similarities are obvious, although, as it is a series and therefore they have more time, the performances and humour in *The Sopranos* are subtler. Thus, it doesn't need sledgehammer comedy to critique its own form. For example, in comparison to the Godfather scene in *Analyze This*, Tony Soprano gives his irritating WASP neighbour a shoebox full of sand to "keep" until he needs it. The neighbour (who daren't open the box to find out what's actually in it) and audiences are meant to make the link to Vito's early years in *The Godfather II* (when Vito "keeps" Clemenza's arsenal of guns for him). The on-going joke about the neighbour's annoying fascination, tinged simultaneously with fear, is superb. It is an example of the Mafia using popular cultural perceptions and cinema discourse to their own

advantage - the neighbour's cultural knowledge is artfully used against him. If you are a fan of the TV series it's still worth seeing the film, but the comedy may seem blunt in comparison. However, this is not to suggest that the film is not clever. It is well-scripted, moderately paced and precise in its knowledge of the gangster form. If parodies are good for the soul, then *Analyze This* achieves that goal. It may even help to absolve some of the guilt for die-hard gangster fans by reminding them that films are "only fiction" before they happily return to the serious stuff.

# Cookie's Fortune

Dir: Robert Altman, US, 1999

## A review by Gordon Reavley, The Nottingham Trent University

A notion crossed my mind while watching *Cookie's Fortune*, after more than 30 films, the latest film from Robert Altman. Could auteur theory be applied to Altman's work, an oeuvre of such disparity as to render comparisons between, *Thieves Like Us* and *The Player* almost meaningless? The New Hollywood cinema of Altman and Coppola is characterised by its loose narrative structure, often incoherent storytelling, and the absence of spatial and temporal continuity. As such, it asks instead for the educated audience to look for the marks of authorship to make sense of the film. Is it possible then to watch *Cookie's Fortune* and to get a sense of the often cynical perspective on American values that was so apparent in *Nashville* or *Short Cuts*?

Altman's films are often vehicles for his ensembles to react to relatively superficial plots and *Cookie's Fortune* is no exception. As Altman has described the film as a "comedy of manners", we can expect that he will use humour to examine the peculiarities of cultural and personal patterns of behaviour. The slight plot thus remains subservient to the director's notion of how the ensemble will react to it. After an inordinately long opening during which Altman introduces us to the characters and the location, the macguffin that drives the narrative turns out to be the "murder" of "Cookie" Orcutt, sensitively played by Patricia Neal, so outstanding in *Hud*.

The location is one of those claustrophobic little Southern towns where racism and deep eccentricity simmer below the surface and where everyone knows (or thinks they know) everybody's business. Holly Springs, Mississippi is a matriarchy where all the men appear to be absent or deeply dysfunctional. It is obvious from the first notes on the slide guitar of David A. Stewart that the milieu is hot, fetid and probably interbred. After the introductions to the various eccentrics, the plot kicks in when Orcutt, grieving for her dead husband and, incidentally, providing some of the film's most touching moments in Neal's gestures of remembrance, puts a gun to her temple and fires the single shot needed to reunite her with her dead husband.

Unfortunately, this robs the film of its most absorbing character and in the subsequent ninety or so minutes the film degenerates into sub-Faulknerian melodrama and, in scenes where Liv Tyler as Orcutt's niece, Emma, gets together with Chris O'Donnell as the sheriff's deputy, something more reminiscent of *The Dukes of Hazzard*.

The suicide is the signal for the appearance of Orcutt's estranged nieces. Glenn Close, rather miscast as the *soi-disant* aesthete of the community, plays Camille in a performance that becomes increasingly bizarre and histrionic, verging on operatic compared to Altman's naturalistic ensemble. To be fair, Close has a difficult task to make the excesses of Camille seem believable and that she does not succeed is more the result of an over-written part than

of Close's acting abilities. In the end, the burden of trying to resolve the whole plot is too much for Close; the credibility of her character finally fails to convince and weakens the whole film.

Playing against type, Julianne Moore as her subservient and disorientated younger sister is similarly misused especially when her fine performance in the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski* is taken into account. Moore's performance, however, never deteriorates into pathos and she is able to bring a sense of determination and vulnerability to Cora, especially in the final scenes when the worm finally turns. In an attempt to cover up the suicide to avoid a scandal, Camille fakes a burglary and subsequent murder.

The audience thus has superior knowledge for the rest of the film and any mystery rests with how long it's going to take the police to discover that their main suspect, Charles S. Dutton in a fine performance (reminiscent of Morgan Freeman's duet with Jessica Tandy in *Driving Miss Daisy*) as Cookie's companion, Willis, is innocent.

In earlier films like *The Long Goodbye* and *McCabe and Mrs Miller*, Altman turned conventional notions of genre (respectively, film noir and the Western) upside down. Because the audience has privileged information, *Cookie's Fortune* is not the thriller that we could have expected from another director, nor is it the slice of Southern Gothic that the pre-publicity seems to suggest it is; it is not nearly dark enough for that.

Had the tone erred more towards the dark end of the spectrum with more than the veiled hints of madness and inbreeding that are apparent, then the short stories of Flannery O'Connor might have seemed to have influenced Altman but the resulting film is closer to screwball comedy. The racist implications inherent in the plot are never explored as they were in say, Jewison's *In the Heat of the Night*. The tensions between the antebellum quaintness of the town and its genteel aristocracy and the poor, black community remains below the surface. Having previously supervised scripts on films such as *The Accidental Tourist* and *The Color Purple*, Anne Rapp, whose first produced script this is, elects to ignore more serious implications and go for a lighter feel. As usual with Altman, it is more productive to look in the margins for the gems that are there. A scene where the black policewoman discreetly unfastens the top button of her uniform to compete with the singer Ruby Wilson's cleavage is masterful yet understated.

Similarly, in a scene where Altman is uncharacteristically sympathetic and concerned with showing the better side of human nature, Ned Beatty as local sheriff Lester Boyle is convinced of Willis' innocence "Because I've fished with the man". However, a peripheral character such as Lyle Lovett's creepy catfish dealer strikes a jarring note in an ensemble cast which is generally of a high standard and I wondered why Altman continues to use him.

Essentially, although Altman's main concern is with the characters and how they react to a given situation, the "look" of the town (used almost without any additional cosmetic treatment) is central to Altman's premise. He manages to imbue the town with a genuine sense of place; not only the feeling of claustrophobia and inbreeding hinted at earlier, but the small-town, human-scale atmosphere. Although conforming to small-town stereotypes, it never sinks under the weight of them. Although the usual suspects are still there - the sheriff's office, the church and the catfish plant - they are given meaning beyond their worn out Southern iconography.

To a large extent, he is aided here by the photography of Toyomichi Kurita whose saturated colours, informal camera work and partially obscured framing bring a certain reality and a sense of personal observation rather than filmic framing to the town. This is achieved without ever descending into the Renoiresque ambience that the publicity implies is there. Stephen Altman's production design helps too; the sets avoid the wealth of superfluous detail that often capsizes filmic and televisual attempts to convey period atmosphere.

I don't believe this is one of Altman's best movies but then neither is it merely a footnote to a fine career. Had the writing been stronger, it may have achieved more coherence and, as well as being quite seriously weakened by Close's histrionics, its final dénouement stretches credibility almost to breaking. In its favour, Altman shows a sympathy for his characters at odds with his earlier, often more cynical perspective. Ultimately, it probably isn't possible to detect any kind of thread that runs through his movies but I wonder what a first-time viewer of Altman's work, when watching *Cookie's Fortune*, would make of all the praise heaped upon him.

# Last Night

Dir: Don McKellar, Canada, 1999

## A review by Tim Noble, University of Nottingham

Amid the current glut of high-budget "event movies" (*The Phantom Menace*, *The Mummy* and *The Matrix* to name but three), it is easy to forget that films were ever about anything but CGI driven struggles between good and evil. In keeping with contemporary cinematic expectations, it is equally hard to imagine that, if the world were going to end, we would see anything less than some identikit everyman strap on an ever more sophisticated suit of armour and save the world almost single-handedly. In these terms then, the Canadian produced *Last Night* is something of an anomaly: the omnipresent CGIs are nowhere to be seen and, as for any of the human characters bothering to save the world... they're all too busy eating Christmas Lunch and acting out every single one of their most personal sexual fantasies.

The film has a very simple premise: it focuses on the last six hours of a small group of Toronto residents before (a refreshingly unspecified) Armageddon wipes them out. Writer/Director Don McKellar plays Patrick, a pseudo 1970s anti-hero trying to make the most of his last night alive while fulfilling his filial duty to his parents. Sandra Oh (*The Red Violin*) plays a woman (Sandra) desperately trying to get home to her Gas Company Executive husband, Duncan (played by David Cronenberg) to fulfil a suicide pact which they have arranged in advance. Patrick meets Sandra on the doorstep of his apartment after a gang of "revellers" physically overturns her car. After the two meet, the narrative settles into an episodic pattern in which Sandra and Patrick's search for a new car is interspersed with vignettes involving their family and friends and their preparations for the inevitable.

The final hour of the film thus becomes a chronicle of a handful of very disparate individuals during their final hours on earth and some are more interesting than others. The most stereotypical of all these characters is Craig Zwiller (played by *Due South*'s Callum Keith Rennie) who is a successful twentysomething bent on accomplishing every feat of sexual depravity he has ever conceived before the end of the world. However, it is to McKellar's credit that a character who could so easily have become a caricature remains complex in his motivations and is never judged by the narrative events. This complexity is also true of the other principal characters. The casting of David Cronenberg as the Gas Company Executive is a great success. It is implausible that a realist drama would contain a character who would be so dutiful that he would spend a large part of his last day ringing his clients to wish them all the best and inform them that the Gas would be kept on right up to the final minute. However, Cronenberg's ghoulish looks and his macabre directorial persona/oeuvre render his character utterly believable through a curious dialogue between what we know of Cronenberg the director and what the script tells us about the character.

Even characters who seem annoying, such as Patrick's two aunts (who come across like a failed attempt at cross-breeding *The Golden Girls* with Thora Hird and Co. in *Last of the Summer Wine*) are rescued by being given striking lines that are completely at odds with the

sentimental, family moments of which they are a part. This, I feel, is McKellar's big triumph - his realist perspective is never overshadowed by the epic circumstances in which the characters exist. The denouement is particularly well structured: periods of heart-warming sentimentality such as Duncan's secretary finally losing her virginity also result in sexual athlete Zwiller fulfilling one of his ultimate sexual fantasies. This could be construed as a cynical and vindictive dynamic to the script, but the characters are never punished by narrative events. It seems, rather, that McKellar's script is possessed of a tolerant attitude towards its characters, as though there is no moral/political angle, just the willingness to let humans be themselves. Of course, the film is a huge flight of fancy, but, while using such a big concept to frame its characters, the film remains sensitive to and focused on the human inadequacies and foibles it tries so hard (and so successfully) to portray.

It should come as no surprise that this film has come out at a time when "pre-millennial tension" is the current social condition of choice. Furthermore, McKellar's himself admits that *Last Night* fits neatly into current pre-millennial nostalgia. The film's mise-en-scene evokes countless 1970s films and television programmes, all grainy film stock and desolate North American streets, soundtracked by the likes of Parliament and the 5th Dimension. The 1970s were the last time that the world looked promising: the 1960s had brought about great social change and it seemed as though people power might really make a difference in the new decade. Writers on nostalgia talk of the 1990s as a time of looking back, hankering after a distant Golden Age that seems better than the deficient present; that such a process is at work in *Last Night* is hardly surprising. It is presumably on this that McKellar bases his opinion that the film is fairly optimistic, a more accurate word would be "romantic". The cinematography is particularly striking in its mixture of styles and telling in its "retro feel": in one shot Patrick is off-camera under the steering column of a car while Sandra's face is framed in a steering wheel - a very abstract New Wave composition. In another, Sandra is framed in long-shot, walking down a misty street with a tram behind her - a curiously beautiful, almost Expressionistic scene, contemporised and exoticised by the Oriental Sandra.

Unsurprisingly, the film does not envisage progress: at the end of the world, the characters return to a quasi-1970s environment when style was kitsch (the end of the world is soundtracked by the package holiday favourite "Guantanamera" (nice touch)) and everything was somehow less threatening. *Last Night* is a provocative film, having as its central premise a question that has been the subject of heated debate and wistful daydreaming for many years. It has, thankfully, been made by a man with a keen eye for human behaviour and an uncanny ability to head off cliché when it seems almost inevitable. It is, by turns, humorous and touching, desolate and cruel. It elicits a tremendous performance from Sandra Oh, with McKellar and Cronenberg turning in admirable performances in roles which could so easily have fallen into caricature and absurdity. However, taken as a metaphor for the end of the millennium and the times of which we are currently a part, *Last Night* promotes an all too common and frustrating viewpoint in both its content and its stylistic execution: there is no going forward yet, we must wait around and amuse ourselves with nostalgia, while we work out which direction to take in the future.



# Rushmore

Dir: Wes Anderson, USA, 1998

## A review by Martin Flanagan, The University of Sheffield

From the smart black comedy of *Grosse Pointe Blank* to the hip ironic laughs of Kevin Smith and Williamson; from the brittle, misanthropic worldview of Todd Solondz to the hopelessly broad yet undeniably funny gross-out humour of the Farrelly brothers, we appear to be in the midst of a mini-renaissance of American movie comedy (notwithstanding the huge success of Adam Sandler). Even John Waters is back on form (*Pecker*), while the much-anticipated *Bowfinger* teams up two eighties' comic icons, Steve Martin and Eddie Murphy, who have each survived an artistically awful first half of the decade and somehow retained credibility (only just, in Murphy's case). Pitched into this comedic purple patch, Wes Anderson's *Rushmore* somehow distils and refines many of the best traditions represented by that roll call of comic talents into a wry new take on the high school genre. It presents us with an initially unappealing, school-age protagonist (like Solondz' debut, *Welcome To The Dollhouse*), employing a dextrous mix of physical, verbal and sight gags, and trading off the lugubrious charisma of Martin and Murphy's *Saturday Night Live* colleague, Bill Murray. This quixotic comedy exploits the random embarrassments and humiliations of everyday situations as does Solondz or the Farrellys, but in an infinitely less painful way than the former and with a considerably more subtle comic palette than the latter.

The protagonist is Max Fischer (Jason Schwartzman), a precocious fifteen-year-old of no fixed talent. From working-class stock but enrolled as a scholarship student at the esteemed Rushmore private school, the upwardly-mobile Max is "no quitter", and refuses to let his lack of academic ability drag him down. Membership of clubs and societies provides an outlet for Max's undoubted energy and, probably more significantly, assets for his CV. His diverse extracurricular commitments are reeled out in a hilarious early montage where Max is revealed as the founder and, more often than not, the sole member of stout fraternities such as the Rushmore Beekeeping Society.

Max's determination catches the eye of the school's principal benefactor, morose local industrialist Herman Blume (Murray), who, cursed with two unambitious, brawling sons of his own, takes the more enterprising Max under his wing. Meanwhile, catching Max's own eye is first-grade teacher Rosemary Cross (Olivia Williams), whose propensity to treat Max as an intellectual equal encourages his doomed romantic attachment to her. When the pair fall out, Blume is engaged to act as a go-between but suffering from a lousy marriage, falls for Miss Cross himself and, much to Max's consternation, starts seeing her. Max's plan to win her favour, building a Blume-funded aquarium upon the school's sports field, backfires and as a result Max is expelled from the institution that has become his entire life.

Forced to start again at a state school for which he can barely conceal his distaste, Max's ordered, self-important life unravels, his fall from grace mirrored by Blume's break-up with Rosemary (partly engineered by a stung Max). Eventually a truce is called between the increasingly despondent Blume and the friendless Max, and they pool their energies into

winning back Rosemary for Blume while simultaneously reinvigorating Max's academic and artistic career with an incredibly ambitious theatrical epic set during the Vietnam conflict and staged at Max's new school.

Unlike the national monument from which its title is borrowed, nothing is set in stone in *Rushmore*. The first half of the picture, detailing the development of Max's friendships with Blume and Rosemary and the hatching of the aquarium plan that will sow the seeds of his ultimate hubris, sketches out the three principals in recognisable fashion. Max is the kind of preternaturally serious and self-assured child essayed by Christina Ricci in two *Addams Family* movies; Murray plays a variant on the self-made, self-centred ogre he also portrays in *Scrooged*, *Groundhog Day* and *Kingpin*; and Olivia Williams' Miss Cross seems lifted straight from the educational archetype of *Mary Poppins*, saccharine-sweet and naively innocent. However, as things start to slide and Max is forced to re-evaluate his relationship to the adult world that he is so desperate to inhabit (including his bond with his father, a humble barber played by Cassavetes' regular Seymour Cassel), the characters start to change, to gain more depth, at no expense to the laugh ratio. A brace of winning performances underwrites the transition: Schwartzman is stunning as the unnaturally grave Max, while Murray depicts sadsack Blume with the most melancholy performance yet in a hugely varied comic career. In one scene, Blume attempts to vault over a gate to impress Rosemary. The not entirely unpredictable pratfall that results is imbued with real pathos by Murray, as Blume struggles to recover his dignity, yet still draws a laugh.

Comic highlights include Max's running feud with a psychotic Scottish boarder, his odd romance with an equally precocious science student, and the young *auteur's* deliriously derivative theatrical productions, which appear to be based solely on his experiences of watching films on television. His adaptation of *Serpico* features the Pacino character (played by Max himself, of course) confusedly aping the actor's mannerisms from *Heat*, while the Vietnam opus, *Heaven and Hell*, nods not only to Oliver Stone in its relentless regurgitation of war-is-hell clichés. The wry comic tone and impassive observation of patently ludicrous rituals has affinities with Baz Luhrman's *Strictly Ballroom*, but the effect of the whole is rather like some unholy cross between *The Graduate* and *Welcome To The Dollhouse*. Anderson and writing partner Owen Wilson, previously collaborators on *Bottle Rocket* (unseen in Britain), judge the humour with great acumen, accomplishing the tricky feat of creating a genuinely sympathetic but splendidly unattractive hero. In addition, a well-chosen soundtrack of classic rock (Who, Kinks, Faces) and garage obscurities (Creation, Donovan) gives this unlikely coming of age tale an unobtrusively nostalgic feel.

# The Sixth Sense

Dir: M. Night Shyamalan, USA, 1999

## A review by Joseph P. Redington, Manhattanville College

In *The Sixth Sense*, writer/director M. Night Shyamalan, in his third feature film, faces a difficult problem: how do you tell an utterly familiar, perhaps even clichéd story, about a boy who is haunted by the dead people around him? Shyamalan's answer is to give the audience what they expect, and then to turn the tables on them, using their own familiarity with the conventions of the horror genre to lead them into a film that is far less horrific than they were led to believe, and far more intelligent, inventive, and emotionally effective than they might imagine.

*The Sixth Sense* opens with Malcolm Crowe, a prominent Philadelphia child psychiatrist (played with refreshing reserve by Bruce Willis), who has received a commendation from the city and is celebrating with his wife Anna (Olivia Williams). The award signals the culmination of a professional career that has overshadowed everything else including his marriage, as Anna is quick to point out. Malcolm promises that this will change, but before the couple can enjoy this reassessment of priorities, he is shot by an intruder, a former patient named Vincent Gray (Donnie Wahlberg), now grown and still afflicted by the demons of his youth. The scene fades out and changes to a Philadelphia neighborhood in autumn, where we see Malcolm waiting on a bench to meet his next patient, Cole Sear. Cole (a brilliant Haley Joel Osment) is being raised by his divorced mother, Lynn (Toni Collette), and suffers from unseen terrors similar to those that haunted Vincent. Besides the painful memories he is trying to overcome by treating Cole, Malcolm is also confronted by his growing alienation from Anna, who has withdrawn from him apparently because of his obsession to correct his past failure. As Malcolm tries to discover what is haunting Cole and to repair his relationship with his wife, he slowly begins to realize that Cole's case is much worse than at first suspected, and that the demons which haunt Cole (and haunted Vincent) are literal rather than metaphoric.

This type of story has been done many times before in a hollowly formulaic manner, such as in Jan de Bont's *The Haunting*, also released this summer. What appears to be a rather conventional horror film (child endangerment, denial followed by acceptance of the macabre/fantastic) and Hollywood film (professional and personal conflicts that are ultimately resolved in a way that reinforces the integrity and value of the nuclear family and the professional accomplishment of the hero) gradually gives way to a much more subtle, delicate story about observation and interpretation. *The Sixth Sense* examines the ability to comprehend that which is around you, not only in its thematic and plot elements but also in its cinematic structure, where the ability to be misdirected by one's perceptions and presumptions is exploited.

Shyamalan's mature understanding of film grammar (confidently executed by veteran director of photography Tak Fujimoto) allows him to play with the conventional visual structure of the horror film in order to shape it to meet his own narrative needs. He does utilize several

horror conventions, such as using movement at the periphery of the screen and the sudden revelation of a grotesque sight, to shock the audience. But these techniques are complemented by more inventive approaches that create a greater sense of unease. For example, early in the film there is a long handheld tracking sequence of Lynn preparing herself and Cole for the day. The camera follows her from the small laundry room adjacent to her kitchen into the kitchen where she shuts some high cabinet doors and hands Cole a box of cereal. She walks back in the laundry room for no more than two seconds and then emerges to see Cole still sitting in his chair, yet every cabinet door and drawer in the kitchen are now open. Whether this feat is accomplished by means of a disguised edit carefully hidden in the sequence or through the ingenuity of the production designer, the effect is quite startling as the association of the tracking shot with real time ties the audience's response to Lynn's startled cry we both know that Cole could not have possibly opened everything in such a short period of time. While the tracking shot has become almost passé in Hollywood films due to the widespread use of the steadicam, Shyamalan takes advantage of our familiarity with this technique and uses it to further reinforce the shock of the scene.

Throughout *The Sixth Sense*, Shyamalan provides us with visual patterns that both serve the plot and connect the characters to one another in interesting ways. In the opening sequence, Anna's discussion of the personal sacrifices Malcolm has made for the sake of his career is reinforced visually, as the shot of Malcolm and Anna gazing offscreen at the award is followed by the reverse shot of a large, engraved plaque, with Malcolm and Anna reflected in it. The reflection motif is continued throughout the film, both in actual reflections in mirrors, doorknobs, and the glass of picture frames, and in the delayed reflection of recorded images and sounds which help reveal the nature of Vincent's and Cole's gift/affliction.

But Shyamalan builds a social commentary into his film that also reveals the more temporal afflictions that abound. The Sears' economic circumstances mark them both and exacerbate their fears for each other. Lynn struggles with two jobs in order to keep Cole in his private school, yet is confronted with the constant threat of losing Cole, both to his bizarre behavior and to a social system which sees Cole as a victim of child abuse (poignantly illustrated in a hospital scene with Shyamalan himself as the accusatory physician). Cole, on the other hand, must grapple with the constant appearance of the ghosts who threaten him, all victims of the sort of domestic violence that his economic situation often produces. His hauntings also continue in his school, which used to be a courthouse. Cole points out to his class, much to his teacher's displeasure, "They used to hang people here," and we later encounter the hanging bodies that confirm his statement. Cole also fears the loss of his mother's love and respect, so much so that he would rather risk being considered a freak than tell her the truth and possibly confirm this belief.

The relationship between Lynn and Cole is the emotional and narrative center of the film, largely due to the onscreen relationship between Collette and Osment. Shyamalan's story provides several opportunities to witness the dynamics of the relationship, from the tension of a confrontational dinner conversation to brief moments of whimsy, such as Lynn speeding Cole through a grocery store parking lot in a shopping cart. It is the careful way in which Collette and Osment play off of and react to each other, however, that allows the relationship to remain plausible without devolving into melodramatic scenery-chewing.

The relationship between Malcolm and Anna is notable for the opposite quality, the total absence of interaction between two people inhabiting the same space. After his first meeting with Cole, Malcolm shows up late for dinner with Anna at the restaurant where he asked her

to marry him. As he tries to explain why this case is important to him, the check arrives. She takes it before he can reach it, pays and leaves without acknowledging Malcolm, other than a muttered "Happy anniversary" as she walks out. The disconnection between the two continues to grow throughout the film, as Malcolm becomes more involved with finding Cole's cure and Anna becomes more involved with a young man who works with her in an antique store.

Listening becomes the key to resolving all of the conflicts, as might be expected in a film where a psychiatrist is the hero. Malcolm must learn to listen to his patients more carefully, reexamining what would normally be seen as his primary gift, in order to reach his resolution. Cole must learn to listen to what the ghosts say in order to help them and help himself. And both Malcolm and Cole have to find a way in which they can get the women in their lives to listen to and believe them.

This focus on listening as the answer might seem an unsatisfying resolution, and the ultimate success of the film is tied into the sudden surprise ending, which undermines the viewer's confidence in his or her own powers of observation. While a surprise ending often seems like an attention-getting parlor trick, the ending of *The Sixth Sense* enhances every aspect of the film. It reshapes the nature of the relationships between the characters, as well as the relationship between the viewer and the film. It is worth experiencing once unawares to appreciate the grace with which the ending remains consistent with the rest of the film, yet uses the audience's reliance upon standard narrative and cinematic technique to maneuver us into a position where we, like Malcolm, must learn to question our own observational biases in order to arrive at the truth.