

# Questions of Unreliable Narration in *The Sixth Sense*

Coral Houtman, University College of Wales, Newport, Wales

This paper will address two questions about the narration of the film *The Sixth Sense*. The first is: How far is the narration unreliable, tricking the viewer into a misunderstanding of the plot? The second is: How far is this unreliable narration consistent with the underlying thematics of the film, and the way these are addressed through the characters' interactions and their interactions with the viewer? I will argue that whilst the viewer is tricked into perceiving events in ways that subsequently turn out to be false, they are actually being placed in a situation by the film-maker whereby they leave the cinema having had some of their prejudices questioned, their unconscious assumptions revealed. They thus achieve a catharsis whereby their traumas are integrated into a more satisfying state of closure. What I hope to show is that the narration in *The Sixth Sense* serves a consistent aesthetic, and its very unreliability at the level of plot demonstrates a deeper coherence functioning at the level of character psychology, motivated by the film's self-conscious understanding and use of psychoanalysis. To this end, I shall be employing narrative theory and its understanding of how narrative comprehension in film depends on fulfilling a consistent set of expectations set up by the rules of the film and film-making more generally, in order to explore how the film disguises its own inconsistencies, but also using Lacanian psychoanalysis to test the rigour of the film's psychoanalytic project. I shall argue that the ghost story in *The Sixth Sense* is a parable of psychoanalysis and the listening cure, and the film's narration treats the audience, as well as the major characters, as part of the analytic relationship. In taking up this thesis, I am also relying on a signal of authorial intention from the director, M. Night Shyamalan. I read Shyamalan's cameo role as a children's doctor as the work of the text (what I shall call the implied author) directing us to make connections between film directing, and the psychoanalytic practice of the story. Shyamalan's own background -- the son of two parents who were doctors and who, according to Shyamalan wanted him to follow in their footsteps, and a wife pursuing a Ph.D. in psychology (Antonio 2000), creates correlations which encouraged me to look for a psychoanalytic structure in the narration of the film, as well as in its narrative. In my conclusion I shall be looking at how this particular reading of the film fits into the context of cognitive and psychoanalytic approaches to narrative and to film studies and whether these two diverse approaches can be reconciled.

## I

George Wilson, in *Narration in Light*, calls the degree to which a film creates unreliable narration *epistemic reliability*, which he defines thus,

As a film proceeds, an audience's understanding of narrative developments depends not only upon its assimilation of the information with which it is

directly presented but also upon its grasp of an imposing complex of inferences that it must make, consciously or unconsciously, from the visual manifolds that it is shown... A large and complicated part of the function of any film narration is to present immediately just enough material so that the desired inferences will reliably be drawn. But there is always an actual or potential gap between the inferences that will be made and the inferences that would, by some reasonable standard, be justified. Where a substantial disparity exists between the two classes, questions are implied either about the narration's power to construct a satisfactory fictional narrative or about the audience's acceptance of that power. (Wilson, 1986: 5)

In order for the film to mislead us, it withholds the evidence we need to read the story correctly, and plays fast and loose with the consistency with which we expect to see characters' perceptions. Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Genette, 1980: 189) introduced the term "focalization" to define the various ways in which narrative is filtered through the sensibilities of characters in the novel, and the concept has been adopted by cognitive theorists such as Edward Branigan (Branigan, 1992: 101-107) and Murray Smith as equally applicable to narrative film. According to Smith, focalization involves

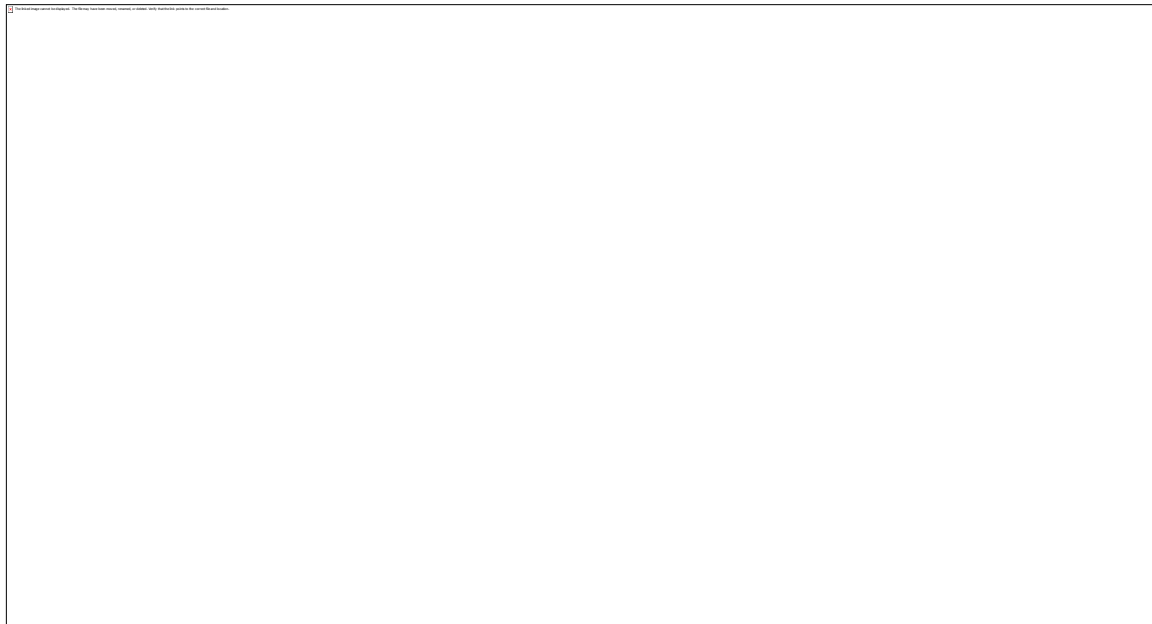
two interlocking functions *spatio temporal attachment* and *subjective access*... Attachment concerns the way in which the narration restricts itself to the actions of a single character, or moves more freely among the spatio-temporal paths of two or more characters. Subjective access pertains to the degree of access we have to the subjectivity of the characters, a function which may vary from character to character within a narrative. (Smith, 1995: 83)

If a film follows a character through *spatio temporal attachment* then the film is said to be externally focalized through that character. If a film has clear *subjective access* to the inner thoughts, the dreams, the perceptions, or even, to a lesser extent, the point-of-view shots of a character, the film is said to be internally focalized through that character. In *The Sixth Sense* the unreliable narration leads us to believe we are watching an unfocalised or objective narration, neutrally showing us the action, whereas, in fact, the film has been filtered through Malcolm's consciousness throughout, internally focalized through him and his misrecognition of his own reality. The film director Mike Leigh says that in order to film a scene, one must imagine it in 360 degrees, from all angles and from all characters, and this is precisely what this film refuses to do, creating its dazzling narrative suspense through the privileging of Malcolm's truth.

Todorov, in "The Typology of Detective Fiction," explains the detective story as an embedded double narrative, the story of the crime, and the story of the investigation. If we look at *The Sixth Sense* like this it has a triple narrative. (Todorov, 1975: 44) Story one -- "the crime" -- is the story of Cole and his ghosts: what is causing his ghosts, and what will make them go away? Story two -- "the psychoanalyst as detective" -- is Malcolm's investigation and treatment of Cole how does Malcolm find out about Cole's ghosts and what does he do about them? The resolution of story one and two reveals the true story, three -- "Physician heal thyself" -- the question of Malcolm's problem in relationship to his wife and to his patients, and how he discovers he is dead. Story one appears to be filtered through Cole's subjectivity, internally and externally focalized through him -- and indeed we see him seeing the ghosts. Similarly story two appears to be filtered through Malcolm's subjectivity,

externally focalized through him as we follow his investigations. However, Malcolm's story and Malcolm's perceptions override Cole's, and the narration lies about what Cole sees, creating a duplicity about nature of the focalizations in stories one and two.

The diagram below illustrates how we are misled through the use of duplicitous focalization. The left hand diagram represents how we think the narration is operating before the surprise ending and the right hand diagram shows the true focalizations of the film which we realise afterwards.



Looking at Malcolm's circle in the right hand diagram, whenever he is present we share his experience of the events, and only have access to other people's points of view in his absence. The left hand diagram shows our mistaken perception, where we think we are seeing an unmediated neutral reality. On this side, when Malcolm interacts with the other characters, represented by the shaded cross sections, we assume that these interactions are true representations of his encounters, and therefore must be externally focalized or unfocalised. There's nothing inherently cheating in this conceit. However, Cole is internally focalized in both versions of the narration. We see things through his eyes and come to trust that we are seeing his subjective point of view. When his point of view is subsumed under Malcolm's, this creates an inconsistency in the narration, which makes the first narrative unreliable. If the first narrative is to remain consistent, when Malcolm and Cole are together, we should see Malcolm as Cole surely does, as dead, a victim of physical trauma. Malcolm should expose his wound to Cole, as does the boy with the shotgun wound who turns around and unwittingly reveals half his head is missing. We shouldn't be presented with Cole's true view of the ghosts whilst Malcolm is not there, only to have that view buried or shown dishonestly in relationship to Malcolm. In contrast, the interactions between the other characters demonstrate how we are not being tricked. For example, cross section number 1 shows the interaction between Cole and his mother (Lynn), and is a reliable indicator of what each character feels and sees. Although external focalization may change, so that we gain access both to Cole's perceptions of Lynn, and Lynn's perception of Cole, internal focalization is respected, true for each character, and the suspense is created without resorting to unreliable narration.

The first scene with Cole and Lynn is externally focalized through Lynn. The scene is shot and following Lynn throughout. Lynn is simultaneously preparing Cole's breakfast and dressing to go to work. She moves between the laundry room -- the washing machine -- and the kitchen, followed in a single, hand-held tracking shot which never leaves her. Closing kitchen cupboards and drawers she calls Cole in for breakfast, and we see Cole enter in the foreground of the shot and sit down at the kitchen table, a small figure at the bottom of the left hand side of the frame. Noticing that Cole's tie is dirty, Lynn removes it, and the camera follows her as she leaves the kitchen to put the tie in the washing machine. When she returns all the cupboards and drawers have been opened and the kitchen appears in chaos. There's no sound of drawers and cupboards being opened, so although at this point, we don't yet know about Cole's ghosts, we know something uncanny is going on. What we don't know is whether Cole opened the drawers himself. However, although we follow Lynn and see her version of the story, the narration makes sure that we are not tricked about what Cole might be seeing. By leaving the room with Lynn, the camera leaves us with an ambiguity about Cole, an ambiguity which will eventually be resolved by finding out his ghosts are real. From this moment on, the narration is very careful, never allowing Cole to see ghosts whilst Lynn is around, so that the camera does not have to choose between Lynn's subjective point of view and Cole's. Only near the end of the film does the narration resolve Lynn and Cole's views. In the scene in the car, where Cole sees the ghost of the traffic accident and Lynn doesn't, the camera preserves their different points of view, marking out clearly that Lynn cannot see the ghost when Cole can. On a wide shot favouring Cole sitting in the car with Lynn in the foreground, Cole announces that he can see ghosts and a ghost is standing next to his window. There are no ghosts in this shot, but the camera immediately cuts to a medium close up of Lynn showing her glancing up to the window behind Cole and we infer that she cannot see the ghost and the camera then cuts to a matching close up of Cole. The very visible ghost in the background leaves the shot. The way the ghost is positioned behind Cole places him just out of Cole's field of vision, but clearly part of Cole's perspective. There is therefore an equivalence between the way the camera inhabits both Cole's and Lynn's point of view.

When Cole is with Malcolm, because Malcolm is himself a ghost, this convention would still seem to work. Malcolm can see Cole and Cole can see Malcolm. Malcolm can't see ghosts, and this is established by a very similar sequence to the one above, where Cole sees people hanging in the school corridor but Malcolm doesn't. There should be no problem but there is, however, because the film has established the convention whereby Cole sees what the ghosts don't see -- that they are dead -- and the narration always reveals this early to the audience. All the dead people reveal their scars which suggests they are unconsciously repressing their own death. Either Malcolm doesn't obey this rule because he is an exceptional ghost, or the narration deliberately withholds the information, making us think that Cole sees Malcolm as uninjured. In either case, the film is inconsistent, because, in the first instance, although Malcolm obviously is an exceptional ghost, the emotional truth is that Malcolm is repressing his death and is like the other ghosts in this respect. In the second instance, if Malcolm is to act in character, then Cole and the audience should see this. If the film obeyed the same conventions as it did with Cole and Lynn, then it should establish Cole seeing Malcolm's wounds but Malcolm being oblivious to them.

## II

If the narration is not coherent in terms of the focalizations through the characters, then what makes it psychologically coherent and convincing? George Wilson, in *Narration in Light*, argues that too schematic an understanding of point of view, as hierarchy of focalization, doesn't do justice to the way narration works and the way the point of view of the implied author is actually operating (Wilson, 1986: 203). Wilson encourages us to look at films holistically, at factors distinctive to each film's narration, such as its narrative closure, and its unique figures of narration. I'm going to argue that the important figure of narration in *The Sixth Sense* is the mirroring of Malcolm and Cole as two sides of a coin, two psychoanalytically similar case histories. We come to understand Malcolm's dilemma through a process whereby Cole's story, his Oedipal journey from childhood to manhood, comes to reflect and parallel Malcolm's rite of passage from life to death. This use of narrational metaphor makes Malcolm's discovery of his own death convincing as well as shocking. By sharing Malcolm's emotional perspective throughout the film, knowing the same amount of knowledge that Malcolm knows at any point, the audience is put through the same uncertainty and shock that he is, and is able to undergo the same cathartic process which he goes through. The unreliable narration far from simply cheating the audience enables them to have their own perspectives changed or questioned in the same way as the psychoanalytic process changes Malcolm.

The film enacts its psychoanalytic metaphor not through a classic Freudian framework but via a more up-to-date Lacanian model. The Hollywood psychological thrillers of the forties, for example *The Dark Mirror*, *Secret Beyond the Door* and *Spellbound* were popularisations of Freudian analysis. I think *The Sixth Sense* self-consciously adopts a popular model of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The Oedipus Complex as reinterpreted through Lacan integrates linguistics and psychoanalysis arguing that it is only through the Oedipus Complex that the infant gains language acquisition and an ability to live within the rules of society. As Evans defines it,

The Oedipus complex is, for Lacan, the paradigmatic triangular structure, which contrasts with all dual relations....The key function in the Oedipus complex is thus that of the FATHER, the third term which transforms the dual relation between mother and child into a triadic structure. The Oedipus complex is thus nothing less than the passage from the imaginary order to the symbolic order, 'the conquest of the symbolic relation as such'. The fact that the passage to the symbolic passes via a complex sexual dialectic means that the subject cannot have access to the symbolic order without confronting the problem of sexual difference. (Evans, 1996: 127)

The child realises through the taboo made on its incestuous desires that neither it nor its parents are all powerful and learns to make its demands into desires recognisable to others in language, and also to turn what it perceives as others' overwhelming and inexplicable demands into desires it can understand. In order to achieve this integration into society the child has to be torn away from its overwhelming symbiotic and erotic relationship with its mother, and this is accomplished by what Lacan calls, the structural intervention of the father (although this function may be served by other adults). The child comes to know that its father and mother love each other, and do not love it exclusively. None of them are self-sufficient, and they all need another human being to fulfil their desires. This enables the child to accept the loss of its absolute relationship with its mother, and to enter into the world of sociality and language.

Cole suffers from an invented syndrome, what I'm going to call telepathic conversion hysteria. This means that his symptoms of distress and anxiety are expressed through him seeing real ghosts. In Cole's case, his hysteria is caused by the traumas involved in the Oedipus complex, and his difficulty in successfully negotiating his way to manhood. Juliet Mitchell expresses primal trauma as the dread that "the helpless, prematurely born human infant feels when its existence is threatened on a failure of the provision of its needs." (Mitchell, 2000: 48) This trauma is repeated or re-evoked for the "many large and small traumas" that we all suffer during our lives (Mitchell, 2000: 48-49). Successful growing up means having enough security from parents to establish a sense of safety which is commensurate with our true existence. Cole doesn't have this safety. Instead he has an absent father, a father who has deserted him leaving behind glasses with lenses Cole cannot see through and a watch that doesn't work. Cole's relationship with his mother is both suffocatingly close, dangerously lacking in boundaries and lacking in trust. Lynn's constant reassurance that she trusts Cole, rings false, we can see that she cannot cope with this difficult and unusual boy. Cole tries desperately to be the "man" for his mother, trying to reassure her and create safety for her, visiting her during her nightmare and stroking her forehead. Alternatively he behaves like a helpless baby, leaping into her arms crying, and sleeping in her bed. The lack of a father figure means that Cole cannot negotiate the appropriate distance from Lynn or the outside world, and is left in a traumatised state of fear and uncertainty about what other people want from him. In Cole's case, this fear is personified in the form of the ghosts. Jean Laplanche describes trauma as "the implantation of the enigmatic message," that is, the parents communicating their unconscious wishes or hostility to the child, and the child not having the linguistic or social skills to understand that message. (Laplanche, 1998: 265) The ghosts are Cole's enigmatic message, representing the unconscious hostile wishes of the adult world, how he feels defenceless in the face of others who seem to be terrifying monsters. An example of how the "live" adult world traumatises Cole occurs in his relationship with his teacher. When he is asked to draw at school, and draws a picture of a man with an axe through his neck, he does not expect the unconscious horror of the teacher, and when he tells the class about the school's history as a public place of execution, he has no way to assimilate the teacher's hostility. The ghosts embody the feelings of threat that Cole feels. The way that the ghosts are filmed, either very close up to Cole or far away on a distorting wide angle lens, mirrors Cole's inability to find a comfortable distance from others. The subtle way that the ghosts are usually introduced, not through point-of-view shots, but from behind Cole, just out of his field of vision, make him the object of their gaze rather than the other way around, so they appear as all-seeing monsters.

It is only when Cole learns to interpret the enigmatic messages embodied by the ghosts that he learns to communicate with the living world, with his mother, and to enter adulthood. Malcolm provides the surrogate father figure that Cole has been lacking in order to achieve this. Malcolm plays a game with Cole, when he tries unsuccessfully to guess Cole's secrets, and Cole has to take a step forwards or backwards depending on whether Malcolm has guessed correctly. This game not only shows Cole that Malcolm is fallible, but it begins to point out a way for Cole to find out an answer to approaching others through language and particularly through listening. In Lacan's terms, Cole recognises that Malcolm accepts his own Symbolic castration, that is, he accepts his own fallibility, and is therefore not a terrifying figure like the other ghosts. Cole also reaches an understanding of the Symbolic, of language as an interpersonal tool, where, if he admits his own vulnerability, he can find the answer to his own secret desires of the enigmatic messages that he sends out. Malcolm cannot see Cole's ghosts and so when he suggests that Cole asks them what they want, Cole has to trust Malcolm, to enter the Symbolic by identifying with Malcolm, recognising his

interdependence with others. Cole's entry into manhood is echoed emblematically when, having exorcised the ghost of the poisoned girl by delivering the videotape of her murder to her father, Cole performs in the school play. At this moment Cole achieves manhood by drawing the sword out of the stone, like the young King Arthur. This enables him to deal with his young rival and become accepted by his peer group (they all tumble around on the floor at the climax of the scene), but it is also a demonstration that he has identified with Malcolm, that Malcolm's reassuring glance enables Cole to become a man and achieve bravery in the face of danger.

If I've spent a lot of time on Cole, it is because we understand Malcolm as suffering from a parallel trauma only through Cole's story. Colette Soler indicates that the two possible reactions to trauma are the obsessional and the hysterical:

Imagine a giant female praying mantis approaching you while you are wearing a mask without knowing which kind of mask you are wearing? If you happen to be wearing the mask of a male praying mantis without knowing it, you have a reason to feel angst... If you are face to face with this praying mantis and you are wearing a mask without knowing what the mask is, you will feel angst because you don't know what you are... The obsessional and the hysteric are at this precise limit. (Soler, 1996: 268)

Soler here argues that trauma reproduces the sexual indecision and fear of the other which is resolved through the Oedipus Complex. The traumas caused by Cole's ghosts and Malcolm's violent death therefore thrust the characters into the pre-Oedipal dilemma, although their reactions are different. Whilst Cole is the hysteric suffering from extra sensory projection, then, Malcolm is the realisation of the worst fears of the obsessional neurotic.

Death is the ultimate trauma, and usually people aren't around afterwards to talk about it. Fortunately, or unfortunately, Malcolm is. He straddles the world between the living and the dead, having the qualities of both. He has not yet accepted his death, and as a ghost, one could say that he was in denial. The obsessional's denial of the power of trauma, and the world as all powerful, is to make it dead, to turn it into meaningless ritual. And yet, Malcolm literally is dead, and the people around him, although dead to him, are actually alive, and his journey is to realise this. The film demonstrates him going through a parallel but reverse Oedipus complex compared to Cole.

In the first scene, when Malcolm is shot, what the film shows is Malcolm's hubris. The testimonial giving him freedom of the city, reflects him and his wife, an idealised portrait, too perfect and too in control. There is a connotation here, with the mirror, that Malcolm is stuck in a pre-oedipal, Imaginary stage with his wife, just as Cole is stuck in the same position with his mother. The ex-patient, Vincent Grey, who breaks into the flat, metaphorically breaks Malcolm's shell and shows him a vulnerability, in his naked scarred body. When the boy is in the shower, pointing the gun, the fear for the audience, and for Malcolm is initially, not that he will shoot Malcolm, but that he will commit suicide. Malcolm's relationship to the boy, is, therefore, a mixture of impotence, and a feeling that he is totally responsible for the boy's life. However, whereas trauma creates fear in Cole, Malcolm suffers from guilt and his resurrection as a ghost is totally dependent on his wish to make amends. Whereas Cole is terrified of the monstrous qualities of the adult world to whom he has yet to relate interpersonally, Malcolm believes he has killed the boy, and by extension the world, through his failure, and his symptom is his own death. The world appears dead to him, the Symbolic,

the power of intercommunication is lost, as is a sense of self, of memory. This is why he keeps going down the stairs to the locked cellar and goes to the wrong restaurant for his anniversary. The imagery and mise en scene reflects the difference between Cole and Malcolm. Cole is often seen alone, always a small figure, often from aerial shots, or terrorised by monstrous ghosts, whereas Malcolm is shot straight on, but appears to be isolated behind barriers, behind hedges, and iron fences and windows -- the image of the breaking window is a repeated one -- and invisible to the people he is with, particularly the wife he loves. The mise en scene shows a kind of impersonal death in the world around Malcolm -- the petrified sculptures on the architrave of the church, the toy soldiers Cole manipulates as if he is their God, and the Latin plea, the *De Profundis*, "Out of the depths, I cry to you, Oh Lord", from the Requiem Mass that Cole remembers. All these are figures of Malcolm's displacement from the order of society, a feeling of order which does not include him, a God who is dead, or oblivious.

Malcolm has repressed his own death, and the repressed comes back at first in whispers, on the audiotape recordings, which as in films like *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974) seem to appear as an effect of Malcolm's subjectivity. However, his ability to hear the voices is due to his counter-transference with Cole. He has come to trust Cole, and this trust enables him to start to be aware that the voices are real, and represent the trauma of death which he is trying to deny. He has gained Cole's trust by exchanging his secret with Cole: his failure over his previous patient, for Cole's dead people. Malcolm's success in helping Cole gives him an ability to trust, to sacrifice his illusion of autonomy to create a Symbolic communication, and to start becoming open to other people. Simultaneously, because he has helped Cole, Cole is able to tell Malcolm how to deal with his secret, how to talk to his wife and tell her he loves her. Like Cole, he no longer feels indispensable and responsible for everyone else, and is able to die. In coming to do so, Malcolm realises what Lacan would call "the Real of his Desire", what he actually needs, for his survival (or in his case, demise).

The narration, in making us inhabit Malcolm's perception of reality rather than Cole's or any of the other characters, is the only way that we can share Malcolm's emotional journey, realise it as a rite of passage, share in his loneliness and his self-deception. It enables us to inhabit the world of someone who feels spiritually dead, and share in his rebirth, his regained humanity which is primarily his humility, and his ability to listen and empathise with others.

The cathartic resolution of the film occurs when Malcolm realises the truth of his own death. As Cole has suggested, Malcolm returns to his wife, Anna, to tell her he loves her. As he sits by her sleeping body, she asks him, in her dream -- "Malcolm, why did you leave me?" His reply, that he didn't leave her, becomes a question for Malcolm when he thinks Anna has dropped her wedding ring, the ultimate figure of the Symbolic, the world of human kinship. When he looks at her hand and sees the ring still on it, he lifts his own hand to see it ringless. Malcolm has a series of brief flashbacks where the film reprises earlier scenes in a way which show their true meaning for Malcolm -- Cole talking about dead people "who don't know they're dead," the scene in the restaurant where Malcolm's and Lynn's hands fail to meet across the table, the door to the cellar which is now revealed to be blocked by a desk covered with books, and therefore barred to entry by the living, and these brief flashes of the past are intercut with Malcolm's perceptions of the present -- the single place setting in Malcolm's dining room where his bereaved wife will eat alone, the video of the wedding which Anna has been reliving, trying to mourn Malcolm's death, her cold breath, showing the nearby presence of a ghost -- Malcolm. The viewer shares in Malcolm's increasing knowledge, discovering it simultaneously with him, and therefore undergoes a similar process of coming



to terms with this new information. In a final flashback, the film shows us Malcolm's dying moments, revealing the narrative ellipsis which has sustained Malcolm and our misunderstanding throughout the film. This slow and gentle revelation gives us time to mourn with Malcolm, the loss of his world, the loss of his love, and yet his accommodation with all that his life has accomplished. Malcolm finally communicates with Anna, and the film ends with this quiet moment of reconciliation, a closure which has successfully worked through the trauma with which the film engages.

### III

What is the relevance of this analysis of *The Sixth Sense* for psychoanalytic and narratological film studies? I would like to conclude by contextualising this paper and suggesting that the form of cognitive narratological analysis conducted above need not be incompatible with psychoanalytic and symptomatic readings of films. As Branigan argues "Narrative is a perceptual activity that organizes data into a special pattern which represents and explains experience." (Branigan, 1992: 3) Cognitive narrative analysis addresses the issues of how texts position spectators marshalling their understanding, soliciting their allegiance, and their knowledge, both textually and extra-textually, in order to explain experience. Psychoanalytic film analysis has been concerned with how structures of desire and identification position spectators vis-à-vis filmic texts. There is nothing intrinsically incompatible between these two approaches although psychoanalysis as a tool of narratology has been frequently rejected by the cognitivists. Noël Carroll has described the psychoanalytic approach as "psychoanalytic imperialism" (Carroll, 1988: 169) and Murray Smith writes that "the very elaborateness of the psychoanalytic theory of the mind has obscured its bluntness as an instrument of narrative analysis." (Smith, 1995: 5) However, the above analysis of *The Sixth Sense* is still compatible with the approach of Carroll and Smith because it acknowledges that the film uses psychoanalysis as a recognisable schema from which the viewer can understand the particular plot or even the genre of "Analysis Movies" to which *The Sixth Sense* belongs. Smith writes,

A narrative text can attempt to regiment the viewer's experience, it can encourage the activation of certain schemata over other, but it cannot 'position' the spectator. Like any film, it is constructed in the knowledge of what schemata spectators are likely to bring to it. The filmmaker hypothesizes a shared background of knowledge and seeks to create certain effects against this background. But empirical spectators will differ, in both social and purely personal terms, in the knowledge that they in fact bring to the text. The construal of 'appropriation' of a text by a particular spectator thus may or may not match the interpretation of the film anticipated by the filmmaker. (Smith, 1995: 171)

Thus, it would be justifiable to analyse the Lacanian framework of *The Sixth Sense* as an example of self-conscious use of psychoanalysis to "regiment the viewer's experience" through the use of a schema which the filmmaker knows is already well established in the cultural domain, but it cannot, for Smith, perform responses upon the viewer generated through psychoanalytic insight, because Smith does not believe in the possibility of psychoanalytic insight. However, not all cognitive critics are so hostile to psychoanalysis as a narratological tool. Branigan devotes an entire chapter of *Narrative Comprehension and Film*

to an analysis of cinematic point-of-view which considers with equal respect feminist and non-feminist readings of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Branigan, 1992: 177-191). He acknowledges the rich polysemic nature of filmic text and the openness with which certain texts can be legitimately read. He thus understands *Letter from an Unknown Woman* as “writerly” and the spectator as contributing to the meaning through the particular context which they bring to the viewing. George M. Wilson similarly enables a consideration of the contextual in our understanding of films,

A spectator who is to achieve even a rudimentary understanding of a segment of film narrative must draw non-stop upon the incredible diversity of perceptual knowledge that we ordinarily and untendentially assume we have about actual things and processes. (Wilson, 1986: 4)

Thus, a psychoanalytic perspective is perfectly capable of including the performance of sexual difference and the associated identification patterns and desires we accumulate as part of our gendering process. Thus our gender can be seen to be an important contextual part of what we bring to our comprehension of films and even our construction of narratives.

The major problem with Smith’s approach to narrative is that it is gender-blind, failing to account for why so many films conform to a particular portrayal of the Oedipus complex and sexual difference, and why it has proved historically difficult, although not impossible, to change this gender balance and create stories which portray the process of gendering from a female point of view. This is what feminist psychoanalytic film studies has successfully achieved in the past twenty five years, since Laura Mulvey made her founding intervention in the field of feminist film studies with “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (Mulvey, 1975: 6-18). Mulvey’s crucial insight was the discovery that films made within patriarchy showed the male characters as subjects and the female characters as objects of “the look”. The Oedipal structure of narrative contains the female as spectacle “to be looked at” or has her repressed form return as threat. Mulvey’s argument led to the conclusion that film spectators were constructed as masculine subjects identifying with the Oedipal drama on screen, whether those spectators were actual men or women. Subsequent film theorists investigated the problematic masculinity that Mulvey’s insight disclosed -- for example, Stephen Heath in his analysis of *Touch of Evil* (Heath, 1975) and Raymond Bellour in his segmentation of *The Birds* and his various work on Hitchcock (Bellour, 2002). The Hitchcockian literature around psychoanalysis and feminism is now so large that in the collection of centenary essays celebrating his birth, there is an article surveying the entire literature on the history of feminist film theory seen through writings on *Vertigo* (White, 1999). Other feminist critics sought to find how female spectatorship was possible either within Hollywood cinemas or through a feminist cinema practice. The field is now considerably problematised through the work of critics as Teresa de Lauretis, who has discussed the positioning of a lesbian spectator (Lauretis, 1992), and Kaja Silverman. Silverman has further posited female characters as being enclosed and banished into the “interior” of the Oedipal narrative as characters who possess inferior or dubious epistemic knowledge and whose voices, as well as images, are enclosed within the hierarchy of male character and authorial points of view (Silverman, 1988). Nevertheless, the richness of history in psychoanalytic film criticism does not lose sight of the central ideological concerns of this work which relates patriarchy to the representation of women. A reading of *The Sixth Sense* which takes account of this history could not fail to find that the Oedipal narrative successfully banishes the women characters to the interior of the narrative whereby Cole’s mother does not understand what is happening for much of the film. At the film’s conclusion

she is even filmed with a ghost, which Cole and the viewers can see framed in shot behind her whilst she is unable to see or comprehend what is going on. She is shown to be epistemically unprivileged in relationship to the other characters and the audience. Malcolm's wife is a person who cannot effect the narrative. As she cannot see Malcolm and she has no agency in her relationship to him. Thus she is also contained by the narrative's hierarchy and within Malcolm's gaze and that of the viewer. The little girl who shows Cole the way to exorcise his ghosts demonstrates Mulvey's two forms of female representation -- woman as "spectacle" and woman as "threat." She appears as a ghost, part of the Lacanian "Real" which threatens to overwhelm Cole's Symbolic world. Thus she provokes in Cole and the audience what Mulvey would term "castration anxiety" (Mulvey, 1975: 13), and it is this anxiety which provokes Cole to go to her funeral and expose her step-mother as a murderer. Yet she is mostly contained within the video showing the evidence of her murder, and is thus placed at a narrative level where she cannot contaminate the other characters or the audience with her narrative or visual point-of-view. She is literally an "image". Thus, *The Sixth Sense* can hardly be seen to be a "feminist" film; its affirmation of male Oedipus both contains and expels any dangerous femininity.

I argued in part II of this paper that *The Sixth Sense* is a mature and psychological insightful film, which performs a similar emotional and cognitive reassessment for the viewer to the insight gained through their Oedipal journeys by Cole and Malcolm. How can this reading be reconciled with my own desires as a woman for female centred narrative and a change from tired traditional Oedipal stories? One possible response would be to argue that whilst *The Sixth Sense* may not be feminist, it speaks at least from the position of a "New Man". It is not a tired traditional Oedipal story, but has a clever new Lacanian twist which, although not placing women as important figures in its landscape, does not blame or fetishise them either. Lacan and his film studies descendants, Mulvey et al., argue that there is no signifier for femininity in the Symbolic. This means that we only have masculinity and its signifier "the phallus" to guide us to an understanding of sexual difference. The response of patriarchy towards this "dissymmetry of the signifier" is to situate femininity outside culture where it is equated with the death drive (what Lacan calls the Real). (Lacan, 1993: 176) Thus, patriarchy at its most pernicious tropes the death drive as feminine and punishes women as the possessor of such fictive and dangerous femininity. Lacan's insight was thus to see that patriarchy is a projection which misreads actual women and burdens them with pernicious psychic material. *The Sixth Sense* is truly Lacanian in that it does not do this. The ghosts who have the gaze in this film, appear in the Real (i.e. they appear to embody the death drive threatening destruction for the characters) but are finally revealed to be Malcolm's Symbolic when he finally agrees to enter their world. Thus, by changing the register in which the ghosts exist, the film undercuts any idea of there being an essential Real equated with women and pertaining to female sexuality. The ghosts themselves are specifically not only female but also male, and from every walk of life. The other Lacanian insight which the film follows is to understand the "phallus" not as a symbolic penis, but as the signifier of authority, language and morality that Cole and Malcolm both have to attain in order to complete Symbolic castration and the successful completion of their Oedipus complexes. This divorcing of the phallus from masculinity means that the Oedipal trajectory dramatised in Malcolm's and Cole's stories is not specifically male, but can be accessed by female viewers whose entry into the world of language and society is similarly marked by Symbolic castration. Thus both male and female viewers can vicariously experience their fear of the Real through the haunting of the ghosts and the creepy ghost point-of-view shots that Shyamalan inserts into the film as part of his shock tactics, and can also experience the "working through" and relief that Malcolm feels when he finally lets go and becomes one of the dead. At this point the

audience must also leave the Imaginary of the film and re-enter the Symbolic of their daily lives. However, those spectators for whom the viewing of the film created a catharsis, whether they are male or female, may have, in Branigan's terms, had some important psychical experience satisfactorily evoked and explained.

In conclusion, I am arguing, along with George M. Wilson, for a "lively, reiterated sense of the holistic character of all interpretive work" (Wilson, 1986: 203), and can envisage this being accomplished through a subtle understanding of both the cognitive understanding of narrative analysis and the psychoanalytic understanding of sexual difference, identification and desire.

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