

THE MAGIC OF NIGHT SHYAMALAN IN AIRBENDER

BEATRIZ PEÑA ACUÑA

Universidad San Antonio (Murcia, España)¹

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes, in a general and chronological way, the biographical and filmographic journey of Night Shyamalan, a filmmaker. The dissertation provides some key content and form as constant elements of the filmmaker; it delves into a concrete piece made for all audiences: *Airbender*.

KEYWORDS: values, cinema, Night Shyamalan, constants.

"I play for a living...Success is tied to a feeling of magic, which I can protect"

(M. Night Shyamalan)

RESUMEN

El artículo analiza de forma general el contexto biográfico y recorrido filmográfico de forma cronológica del cineasta Night Shylamanan. La disertación aporta algunas claves de contenido y forma como elementos constantes del cineasta. A continuación profundiza en una obra para todos los públicos: *Airbender*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: valores, cine, Night Shylamanan, constantes.

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¹ Beatriz Peña Acuña (Universidad Católica San Antonio, Murcia /Education and ADE Department/Murcia / Spain). Institutional mail: bpena@ucam.edu



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1. INTRODUCTION

The motivation I had for choosing to talk about this author was due to several reasons. One of them, and an important one, is that he is one of Steven Spielberg's disciples. I read the thesis about this filmmaker and the issue of human dignity in February 2010, only three years ago. Just like Spielberg, Night has retained his child's imagination to compose his stories, risking that such fantasy may seem silly to adults. Such an imagination is precisely a great engine for filmmakers, scriptwriters, or for novels. We need stories because it is an intuitive and at the same time rational way of understanding the world. It is one of the cultural products that we socially agree upon. It is through stories that we still build culture, and how we interpret our life and our identity. Because reality is something more than just what is tangible. Because stories tell about our spiritual human capacity, and our ability to transcend reality.

The imagination of his films and the staging he can create for them through the creation of atmospheres and emotional climax:

"My movies don't get acclaim the day they come. I have to wait longer".

(M. Night Shyamalan)

His narrative can be risky at times: Addressing the topics he deals with and ending up being plausible is risky, and puts a lot at stake. Sometimes he takes the right tack more than others:

"I am fully aware of the giant risk I'm taking. Being as eccentric as my mind will let me and then hearing people's responses. This requires an incredible amount of pain. Everyone around me, 98%, at some point doubted".

(M. Night Shyamalan).

He has a strong sense of the narrative tension, of the mysterious, sometimes in an atavistic way (a bit like Hitchcock's) in which you have no choice but to react emotionally:

"When you say fear of the unknown, that is the definition of fear; fear is the unknown, fear is what you do not know, and it's genetically within us so that we feel safe. We feel scared of the woods because we're not familiar with it, and that keeps you safe".

(M. Night Shyamalan).

He is creative, and original in his stories. He shows thoughtfulness and depth in the treatment of issues about the man. He does not get carried away by Hollywood trends that are a little more playful and superficial for a fifteen-year-old audience. He has his own hallmark. He's an American of Indian origin who has managed to become a director and has carved a niche for himself in Hollywood, a matter of hard fighting:

"My hope is we broke so many rules we created a new rule".

(M. Night Shyamalan).

I was researching at the NYC School of Film Studies and there, and also at the film school of the same university, he was remembered for what he did. He was an admired person, and he left a mark among professors and students. I thought it would be interesting to look into Shyamalan's personality and work.

2. OBJECTIVES

The article intends to give this filmmaker some prominence for certain qualities that we highlight by giving reasons and arguments based on descriptive analysis, taking into account some of the most complex biographical, filmographic, and cultural references made by this author.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article starts with a descriptive analysis of cinematographic language in its codes and elements without claiming to be exhaustive and limited by the format of this dissertation, an article, about the importance of this director, aiming in this analysis to highlight the originality of certain formal and content characteristics through a formal review of his works, and a closer approach to the theme of one of his works, *Airbender*. In addition, a review of the main human values, universal in some of his central characters, is carried out, taking into account the Indian baggage of this director who combines the two cultures (western and eastern) in syncretism.

4. REFLECTIONS

4.1. Biography of this filmmaker

He is an American director born in India; such a thing can be deduced by his own external appearance. His full name is Manoj Nelliattu Shyamalan. He adopted the Americanized name Night in high school.

M. Night was born in India (Mahé, Pondicherry) on August 6, 1970, and grew up in the gated suburban Penn Valley neighborhood in Philadelphia (Pennsylvania). He is the son of two

doctors. His passion for filming began when he was given a Super-8 camera at the age of eight and began to imitate his idol, Steven Spielberg. (www.imbd)

His first film at the age of 22, called *Praying with Anger* (1992), was based in some way on his spiritual journey back to visit India, his country of birthplace, a personal reason for him. He himself raised money for the project, and he directed, produced, and starred in the film. *Wide Awake* (1998), his second film, was written, directed, directed and shot on location at his Catholic school which he attended based on his experiences. Due to strict discipline, his family sent him to a Catholic school although they were of a different religion (Hindi). (www.imbd). This drama is about a child's awakening, finding transcendent meaning and a place in life through little Joshua's search for God after his grandfather passed away. The director commented:

"I was looking for an emotional story. For a long time, the idea of a little boy facing the death of his grandfather, remembering that he once told him not to worry because God will take care of him, was in my head for a long time. Suddenly, this child needs to know if this is for real (...)"

It stars only Indian actors. This film stunned people at the Toronto Film Festival and the American Film Institute.

He is currently 42 years old, married to Bhavna Vaswani, and he is the father of three children. (www.imbd) The cultural background of family heritage is Indian and school and college education is American. We maintain that Night Shyamalan unites the roots of narrative in his Indian culture where reality and the magical and/or transcendent go hand in hand. One has just to think of the origins of the main Indian tales and their repercussions in the West, a tradition that continues to this day, even in Spanish literature, for example, through Carmen Martín Gaité's *Caperucita en Manhattan* (1990). In *Night*, some of the reality escapes empirical knowledge, all that is physically verifiable, that which is taken by the scientific discipline and that is the magic that reigns as a constant in his films.

4.2. Training as a director

Night has worked as a screenwriter, director, and producer. He was trained at the NYC School of Film Studies, where he completed all four courses in three years, as he was an outstanding student. He was notable for his strong narrative, good script structuring, and for his awareness of marketing. He is considered a disciple of Spielberg. The parallelism can be seen in these constants:

- The dualism between scientific reality and intangible reality.
- The duality that presents a realistic and imaginative vision.
- Something unexpected enters into someone's daily life and changes their life, the way they understand life, and the conception of the world.
- In his works, some autobiographical elements can be noticed.

- He provides his characters with emotionality.
- A lot of attention is given to the world and to the point of view of a child.
- Ordinary people overcame themselves with heroism.
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4.3. Filmography as a director

We introduce a brief reminder of his filmography as a director (www.culturalia.net), in accordance with the original title in English, the age of the director, and the time gap between films, to have a quick overview of Shyamalan's filmography to start with:

- *Wide Awake* (1998). He made it at the age of 28.
- *The Sixth Sense* (1999). He was 29 years old. With this film, he sold out at the box office.
- *Unbreakable* (2000). He was 30 years old. He did not make another film for two years after producing this one.
- *Signs* (2002). Aged 32.
- *The Village* (2004). Aged 34.
- *Lady in the Water* (2006). Aged 36.
- *The Happening* (2008). Aged 38.
- *The Last Airbender* (2010). Aged 40.

Shyamalan tasted success with his cinematographic work, *The Sixth Sense*: a mysterious and dramatic thriller with a scatological or esoteric theme in which he gives an atmosphere of realism, veracity, and suspense that is part of the surprise the film offers: The protagonist, a child that a psychiatrist tries to pull out of trauma, is actually dead and does not want to accept his world surrounded by other decrepit dead people who scare, greet and bother him, so he prefers to continue with living people.

For *Night*, this film is about the difficulties of communication and the need to talk about things that are really important. Sánchez Escalonilla especially studies the theme of "incommunication as the present basis of all the conflicts present in (Shyalaman's) script (Sánchez Escalonilla, 2012). The filmmaker recognizes that:

"the lack of communication or keeping secrets from those we love can destroy marriages, careers, families and even lives. By itself that is terrifying"

(Shyamalan, 1999).

The pediatric psychiatrist character D. Malcolm Crowe played by Bruce Willis is inspired by the profession of his wife Bhavna. The film's budget was estimated to be \$40 million. It was released in January, and in May it had already raised \$293,501,675. (www.imbd) which means

a box office success. Night Shyalaman carved a niche for himself in the competitive world of Hollywood cinema. The filmmaker won the Empire Award for Best Director and the Bram Stoker Award for the script (www.imbd).

In the next film, the director and screenwriter is open for his love of comic books, *Unbreakable* (2000). The title highlights a character, David Dunn (actor Bruce Willis once again), who discovers special powers that protect him from being injured after being saved from a terrible train accident. He meets Elijah Price who is the opposite, he has crystal bone disease and holds the theory that what someone lacks, the other gains. David realizes that Elijah is right, he has never been hurt, has great physical strength, and has the ability to predict if others are going to do or have done something wrong. David stands at a certain point in which he's also looking for his place in the world. The genre of this film is drama, mystery, thriller, and science fiction. The movie won two awards (Bogey and Golden Trailer) and 10 nominations. The budget was estimated to be around 75 million dollars. December worldwide revenues were estimated to have reached \$294 million. This film is another box-office milestone.

Signs (2002) is the next film in which the filmmaker returns as a screenwriter. Preacher Graham Hess (Mel Gibson) loses faith in God after his wife dies in a brutal car accident. He decides to move to a farm with his two sons and his brother Merrill. Strange circles begin to appear in the cornfield belonging to the farm. Graham thinks it has been a misdeed of evildoers. After hearing strange noises and seeing news about these circles in other fields, they begin to suspect that there may be aliens. They decide to stay together having faith that they will be out of the alien invasion. The film had three awards and eighteen nominations. For example, composer James Newton Howard won the ASCAP Film and Television Music Award. The estimated budget is \$72 million and the February revenues just in the U.S. were \$227 million (www.imbd).

The Village (2004) is another script from Night classified as a drama, mystery, and thriller. Tells the story of an isolated town thanks to stories about the adjoining forest which is inhabited by dangerous beings. However, one of its residents, Lucius Hunt, decides to go further and change the life of society.

The movie featured a casting of stars such as Sigourney Weaver, William Hurt, Joaquin Phoenix, Adrien Brody, and Brice Dallas Howard. It had an Oscar nomination for original musical composition by James Newton Howard, who excelled once again. It also received three awards and ten nominations. The budget was \$60 million and by the end of November, the revenues were already \$114 million (www.imbd).

Lady in the Water (2006), also written by Night, is classified into the genre of fantasy, mystery, and thriller. Bryce Dallas Howard is once again the protagonist. The story goes like this. A building maintenance man discovers a young woman who doesn't belong to the community of neighbors, swimming in the pool with such luck that he slips, and she rescues him. He reveals to the other neighbors that she is a nereid, a mythical fairytale creature called Story who is being chased. All the neighbors try to save her, each one becoming a character in the story. This film won two awards and four nominations, including the Teen Choice Award

for best summer action-feature film. The budget is \$75 million and by September the revenues were \$42 million in the U.S.

The Happening (2008) is a film classified as a science fiction thriller. It had one award and five nominations. The script was written by Night. It is about a science teacher who tells his students the news, bees have died. Nature behaves strangely and science tries to explain it through theories. Something worse happens when people in Central Park start behaving weirdly and it spreads to the rest of the city. Elliot, his wife Alma, and Jess, who is the daughter of a friend, try to survive. The budget was \$48 million and by September the revenues were \$64 million. Once again a discreet box office.

5. DISCUSSION ABOUT THE QUALITIES OF AIRBENDER

Airbender is produced by Shalaman at the moment when he was having a slump at the box office. For Night, it is important to be commercial, and profitable. The screenwriter for *Airbender* is again Night Shyamalan, but this time the film is based on a 61-episode animated manga television series that was particularly successful in the U.S. from 2005 to 2008, reaching 9.3 million viewers. It was called “Avatar: The Last Airbender” created by Michael Dante Dimartino and Bryan Konietzko, also executive producers -along with Aaron Ehasz, uncredited-. The series was produced by Nickelodeon and animated in South Korea. The television series won awards such as the Annual Annie Awards, Genesis, Emmy, and Peabody awards, among others. The film is produced by Nickelodeon and Paramount Studios. One of the producers is Frank Marshall, one of Steven Spielberg’s regulars in his films.

The story is a success because it achieves a great syncretism emphasizing the content of the film’s history in an oriental way, but seasoned with western elements. For example, in the case of Aang, the topoi of Ulysses, the journey and return of the hero of the classical Greek narrative. Likewise, the genre of the Bildungsroman. It is a novel of culturally Jewish origin. The young boy goes out in search of adventures to see the world (in this case he escapes) and receives the necessary training through them to face life knowing himself, and testing himself.

In this movie, Night Shyamalan adapts the first season or the first book of the series in which Aang manages to master the water. In the series, every twenty chapters in which the Avatar manages to master another element is a book. That’s why the movie also ends as a sequel with a narrative continuation. Night must have prepared the second sequel giving greater prominence to Zoucko’s sister, called Azula. The next book is Earth, and then, there is Fire. All this completes Aang’s mastery of the four elements.

As a screenwriter, Shykamanan allows elements in the narrative that honor his imprint and give the story a greater depth. One of them is the spiritual world that sustains the material one, as a constant that reality is connected to another one, which is more transcendent. Another one is the introduction where variations on the presentation of the television chapters are allowed to broaden the vision (communication, Aang’s purpose according to destiny, etc). A third is the

treatment of ultimate destiny, Aang was born with a sense, but the others and his destiny are connected. Also, he omits many elements from the series or does not develop them as much as Avatar Roku, King Bumi, Suki-Sokka's true love, or places like Roku's temple. He also sparked controversy among fans of the series by hiring three white actors and one Indian for filming when the characters were oriental (Lopez, 2011). Another constant is the exposure to the issue of trauma. Aang, the protagonist, will have to overcome the trauma and fear of grieving that his entire air nation has been killed in order to dominate the water and establish peace.

Having said that, the strengths of the film are:

- The believable acting of young actors, especially Noah Ringer (Aang) and Nicola Peltz (Katara), and the costumes accompany the characterization of the different kingdoms.
- The creation of a magical world felt through the choreography of the masters dominating the air (Aang), fire, water, earth, and successive fights with a well-done work of visual effects. The artistic design shows the parts of the world where Aang travels visiting various tribes; the creation of atmosphere through photography (Andrew Lesnie) for the encounters between Aang and the spirit embodied in a dragon between a parallel reality with the splitting of the image while Aang listens to Karata. The photographic presentation of environments through cold colors (blue) and the soundtrack by James Newton Howard bring mystery, magic, epic, and grandeur to the story; that is, it is at the service of emotion without standing out in the narrative but constantly adding an emotional dimension.
- The narrative for the adventure, suspense, and heroism that presents its characters who at a young age have to prove themselves, face adults, and a king of the kingdom of fire, very powerful and cruel in his actions.
- The presentation of a transcendent, and spiritual reality felt with a sacred respect for both ecological balance and social peace.

In the film it is also possible to talk about values, highlighting some of them such as honor, friendship, responsibility, kindness, and generosity. Some phrases can be heard in the film such as "the dominion of the heart dominates everything and wins". This feeling will mark the decision and attitude of the members of the water tribe together with Avatar. The feeling of responsibility and love in the background will be shown when the Avatar sacrifices himself for his people; to defend his people and deliver them from evil, as well as in the rest of the actions related to friendship, trust, and responsibility.

Friendship can be related to love and wishing your friend the best.

Responsibility is demonstrated in the struggle to achieve goodness and justice; friendship and trust lead to the development of that responsibility in Avatar's role. The value of generosity is linked to the natural tendency of good and kindness. It is because of the trust they place in the Avatar that makes it possible for him, using his own will, to assume the responsibility that

has been given to him: to speak up and dominate the four elements (water, earth, fire, and air), in order to achieve balance among the peoples and live in harmony. He engages in an intertwined way of thought and action so as to reach a just sense of order.

Regarding the question about femininities and masculinities in the movie, the characters are male and female with great complementarity. There is a bond between them; in fact, due to the fact their destinies are connected, when one character shows their story, the other does it too. Moreover, they create emotional bonds of friendship, and in other cases, affective bonds of couplehood. In this film, four boys and two girls appear as heroes.

All of them are strong and show bravery as warriors alike, with the quality of Aang who overcomes himself and his guilt, and the two girls who have a particular role: Ankara protects the Avatar, Aang. And the princess offers her life so the spirit of the moon can be recovered and the balance of nature (and water) can be restored, saving her people's life.

The central character which is AANG, the Avatar, is a boy educated as a monk with a destiny of celibacy. Aang has been educated by the tribes that dominate the air.

KATARA, a brave girl who defends him, guards him, and feels responsibility and friendship for him, joins him. She finds him in an iceberg and wakes him up after 100 years. She has great faith in Aang when he falters. She represents a strong woman. Katara has the gift of mastering water in her tribe. Katara's mother died at the hands of the fire people. Katara is accompanied by her brother Sokka. The young prince of fire, ZOUCKO, is looking for the AVATAR. When he finds Aang he takes him to his father, the king of fire to recover his lost honor. Aang, Katara, and Sokka will find the boy who dominates the earth, his tribe, and the princess who controls the water and the independent tribes of the North. Aang will learn to become a water master from Pakku of the Northern tribes.

Talking about the content, the four elements of nature according to Buddhism appear in the film in terms of the distinction and hierarchy between air, water, earth, and fire. The connection between nature and man is emphasized. Starting from an ecological mentality (as held by many religions and philosophies, Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism, etc). Other oriental elements appear such as the possession of chi (energy) in which masters can produce this element just by themselves. The Ying and Yang. The spirits. The dragon is a spirit that symbolizes power, wisdom, and magic. The practice of mastery of the elements is proposed. Mediation and the subsequent revelation as a way for Aang to connect with the spiritual world. The reincarnation of the Avatar, lord of the four elements, who is able to dominate the four elements and show his power to drag hearts towards peace between people. The Avatar imposes the balance between forces and ambitions through cordiality. The others submit out of respect for him and reach sacredness through him. At the same time, he is able to do so by meditating between the world of mortals and spirits. The Avatar is displayed as a monk who cannot have a family or marry due to the responsibility of ensuring social peace. With each generation, an Avatar is born, and he incarnates in each of the tribes successively.

Simultaneously, the transcendent and the spiritual take on the corporeal form of two fish (the Ying and Yang or a dragon) and allow them to be reached, and even be killed by humans. The spirits are a magnificent force that watches over mankind. Therefore, both the TV series and the film make a syncretism between Western narrative elements and elements of Eastern content. Having success in arousing tribal commercial interest in this story.

If we look at the recognition of Night Shylamanan's work, he received 5 awards and 7 nominations. He had critics such as the Razzie Award for worst director, film, script, and supporting actor (Jackson Rathbone, plays Sokka; an actor who also appears in the Twilight saga). The budget was the biggest so far in its production: \$150 million. The film was released on July 4 in the U.S., and by September, the revenues were more than doubled worldwide, a total of \$319,731,881 (www.imdb), a discreet result compared to *Sixth Sense* which is not bad because somehow Night Shyamalan was able to recover from the box office.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Night Shylamanan reaches the general public and is successful in the US and abroad thanks to the cinematographic formula that he proposes; namely, the exposure of constants that belong to the natural philosophy of mankind, such as finding a place in life (existential sense), the recognition of an extra sensitive reality, projection of the imagination. Furthermore, he is also a teller of mostly unexplored stories, in which he tries to keep the audience in suspense through dramatic tension, uncertainty, thriller, or the creation of environments that he knows how to maintain and drive in the screen. The fact that he directs and composes the script gives him great control over the cinematographic work in making subsequent decisions and about the constants.

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