

The Iconography of Fear: M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs*

By Scott Orris



In the cinematic dreamscape of M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs* (2002) powerful symbols or "signs" uncover the deeper truths within the realms of the human experience. *Signs* is experienced from the confused perspective of Graham Hess, a former Episcopal priest whose wife had recently died in a car accident. It is through this traumatic experience, that Graham would then lose his faith and quit the priesthood. As with Shyamalan's two previous films, *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and *Unbreakable* (2000). *Signs* focuses on the journey of an individual seeking to rectify his past with his present. In all three of these films, it is the child co-star who helps guide the older male protagonist towards uncovering a deeper truth, that was previously obscured by a past event in their lives. In *Signs*, Graham's faith is his journey, as he tries to make sense of his grief over the loss of his wife in the context of an alien invasion. Shyamalan depicts Graham's confused perspective through juxtaposing his flashbacks of his wife's accident with the more immediate threat of an alien apocalypse. It is within this confused perspective that Shyamalan uses "signs" in the film like puzzle pieces, with each piece representing one step further to Graham's realization of how they all fit together. However, without the comprehension of how these signs fit together, they instead serve to instill fear and doubt. The most prominent of all of these signs in the film is the circle. The circle is seen repeatedly throughout the film from the opening credits, the flashlight, to the crop circles themselves. The circle represents how an event, such as, the final words spoken by Graham's wife before she died would actually prevent the death of her son. In creating this cyclical view of time, Shyamalan demonstrates the presence of God by juxtaposing flashbacks with present events, thus conveying the meaning behind Graham's triumph of faith over doubt.

In parallel with his own Catholicism, Shyamalan uses the circle within a Christian context. The circle in Christian iconography has long been used as a symbol of eternity, or a completeness. It has also been used as a symbol of God or in some of the more ancient religions, the first cause of God where everything came forth (Kennedy 19). In *Signs*, the first literal meaning of the circle is the crop circles themselves. These patterns were originally believed to be paranormal in origin, although many have since proven to be hoaxes. Shyamalan's use of crop circles as "signs" starts with Graham's son Morgan discovering a large circle of flattened corn in their field. In keeping with his depiction of children as the guide for the older male protagonist, Shyamalan chose to have Morgan be the first one to discover the crop circle. His line, "I think God did it" and then literally turning his father's face toward the circle itself demonstrates this aspect at the very beginning of the film. When the God's view shot reveals the larger crop circle as a hole, it becomes evident that its cause is supernatural. This is further achieved by Shyamalan in choosing a corn field for the creation of the crop circle. Shyamalan believed that in choosing a corn field, instead of the wheat fields which crop circles were more easily made by hoaxers, that stalks of corn are very difficult to flatten. In doing this, Shyamalan is adding more credibility to a supernatural cause such as aliens (Shyamalan). Graham is at first skeptical of this supernatural explanation and attempts to explain the crop circle as a prank. When the crop circles become a world-

wide phenomenon on the news however, Graham still reacts by turning it off and proceeds to follow the sheriff's advice and go into town to get "everyone's mind on everyday things." But it is not until he finally sees an alien using a flashlight, that Graham actually believes in their existence. The fact the light is circular adds to this symbolism, depicting Graham's fears as represented in darkness, and his ability to "see" the aliens and eventually God as the light. This is most evident when Graham and his family hide in the basement and the light goes out. Faced with an unknown and unpredictable threat of an alien invasion, it is his child Morgan who finds the circular flashlight, symbolically bringing hope to the frightening situation. This light represents the ongoing theme of the circle, which is evoked in this scene as God's presence or truth. When Morgan has an asthma attack, it is Graham who is telling his son to "believe it's going to pass" thus beginning the restoration of his own faith.

In his journey through faith and doubt in the film, Graham is constantly trying to rectify the death of his wife with the alien invasion. This is depicted at the beginning of the film in the shot of the window with a cornfield outside. The view out of the window suddenly ripples which opens the possibility that this perspective is from a dream. This shot allows the viewer to view the cornfield and the rippling effect through Graham's perspective-thus inserting the audience into his mind. In doing this Shyamalan makes the audience an active participant in his jumps in time between the flashbacks and the present. Throughout this opening sequence of the film, Shyamalan is using shots of Graham in the center of the frame. In doing this, he makes Graham's character seem more distant and detached from his former self, as a minister. In his previous films Shyamalan dealt with characters who were haunted by a past which effects how they perceive the present. This relationship between past and present is at its most disorienting in *Signs* (Sofair 57). According to film critic Michael Sofair the events juxtaposed appear so radically different that they cannot be understood through an internal reconstruction of Graham's point of view, that is, through some reworking of his own identity" (Sofair 57).

This is evident in Shyamalan's use of the circle throughout the film. In the opening credits, Shyamalan displays a blue circular light, with the credits slowly emerging. This sequence is symbolizing God's presence, as the perfect circle, without any beginning or ending. Shyamalan is immediately putting the audience into the atmosphere of the film which relies heavily on the contrast between darkness and the sudden fleeting glance of the alien (Johnston 131-132). This creates a kind of rhythm to the film which was explained by the famous late film critic Roger Ebert, "Here is a movie in which the plot is the rhythm section, not the melody. A movie that stays free of labored explanations and a forced climax, and is about fear in the wind, in the trees, in a dog's bark, in a little girl's reluctance to drink the water. In signs" (Ebert "Signs"). In this manner, Shyamalan creates a world where time is fluid, which means the more information revealed by the flashbacks actually correlates with the level of understanding Graham has in his faith.



The first flashback to the accident takes place directly after Graham's speech about the the two different kinds of people. His face is lit with one side dark and one side light depicting the two different outlooks on the current situation one a person "who believes in Signs" and other "just gets lucky." Directly after this scene is a flashback to Graham driving up to the accident where the sheriff reveals that his wife was not in an ambulance. This flashback sequence represents his first reaction to understanding the seriousness of the accident. Which is then followed by the present event of Graham finding his brother watching the TV news with the aliens crafts supposedly invisible in the sky. This event mirrors the feeling of helplessness which Graham experiences at the moment he finds out her accident is much more serious than he previously thought. The shots of Graham driving within the flashback bare a similarity to these shots of Graham staring disbelievingly at the alien threat on television with the same skeptical and hopeless expression on his face (Sofair 57-58). The second flashback occurs after Graham tries to will Morgan to breathe during an asthma attack provoked by an alien who supposedly sprayed him with poison gas. At this point in the flashback Graham learns the details about his wife's condition, that she was pinned in between the truck and a tree. Graham awakes suddenly again, and he has almost the same expression as he did when talking with the sheriff in his

dream. This again demonstrates the interconnectedness of the past and present which is essentially symbolic of the cyclical aspect to the film. The final flashback is a montage sequence which depicts the alien in the house holding Morgan with Graham having the same helpless expression as he does in the flashback. It is through this montage that the individual puzzle pieces of his wife's final words combined with the image of his face which is half dark and half lit which reflects his decision making process at the moment. Graham's thoughts are presented visually with an disembodied type of gaze which reflects his confusion, yet still maintains a kind of common perspective (Sofair 61). This gaze rotates in a circular motion as if symbolically his thoughts are literally coming full circle. It is here where Graham finally has his realization, that the words of his dying wife serve as a prophesy telling Graham "to see" and for Merrill "to swing away." The exact words which Graham's wife says that were attributed earlier in the film to her "neurons firing" as she died, actually had meaning in how to save Morgan from the alien. This demonstrates the importance of God throughout the film, that the very event which killed Graham's wife is what saves their son. This concept of life from death, demonstrates the cyclical nature of the film and provokes Graham's realization of the "signs" of God existence. After the alien is defeated and Morgan is Saved, the room again rotates in a circular manner, this time showing snow in the windows and stopping with Graham wearing his priest collar. This symbolizes God as this perfect circle, who is without beginning or end and brings a completeness to the film's resolution.

In making *Signs*, M. Night Shyamalan has created one man's journey through the extremes of Christian faith and how it reflected on, not only his life, but the lives of his family members as well. This journey was symbolized by the cyclical aspect of an eternal God without beginning or end. It is this lack of understanding these cyclical signs or circles, which Shyamalan expresses Graham's confusion in how to rectify the past event of his wife's death with the present alien invasion. Through the help of his wife's dying words, the alien threat has ceased and his faith is finally restored. The message of *Signs* is not one of conquering an alien invasion, but that of a realization of the complexity of God's love.

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