"Grateful for the Time We Have Been Given"

Cinematic Aging in the Films of M. Night Shyamalan

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Filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan habitually uses cinematic structure to convey larger thematic concerns. Consider, for example, the ways that his 2006 film *Lady in the Water* plays with audience expectations to comment upon the nature of modern storytelling.[2] In that vein, Shyamalan's recent work turns to the question of aging in order to reflect upon the relationship between filmmaker and film-goer. Two of his horror films, *The Visit* (2015) and *Old* (2021), inspire anxieties about getting older and, at the same time, reveal how cinematic form can alleviate those very fears.

Originally titled *Sundowning*, Shyamalan's *The Visit* conveys the palpable terror of an elderly couple suffering from ill health and the subsequent unease of their young wards. It exposes how audiences approach a film with certain expectations, or plans, in mind; however, what Shyamalan's audiences receive never matches the initial blueprint. The form as well as the content of *The Visit* forces spectators to contrast their initial sense of mastery, which is to say, their belief that they can know what is coming, with the unexpected events that actually unfold. The uneasy wards make a documentary about their aging caretakers. As they piece together important bits of the footage, audience members

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2 Patrick Collier argues, Shyamalan routinely comments upon his own "narratological structure" (Collier 2008: 270). *The Village*, for instance, is a "narrative that self-consciously foregrounds and exaggerates its own manipulations" (270).

confront the distinction between the *fabula* (the chronology of the story) and the *syuzhet* (the ordering of the story by the editor). In turn, what initially appears to be unnerving – "sundowning," a term that describes the effects of dementia – reveals itself to be a sort of gift: the ability to accept cinema as it is, in the present, without preconditions. In this way, Shyamalan offers a corrective to contemporary film consumption through his sustained reflection upon the aging process.

Shyamalan's *Old* likewise reflects upon getting older as a uniquely cinematic experience (and vice versa). A group of unwitting tourists are lured onto a mysterious beach that rapidly ages them. Over the span of the film, movie-goers watch as the physical and mental states of the characters deteriorate. Shyamalan again places the spectator in an uncomfortable position: like the cold, clinical scientists that observe this traumatic event from atop nearby ridgelines, the spectator must gaze upon the innocent characters as they struggle to make sense of what is happening to them. The life of any fictional character is always already confined to the life span of a given narrative, and so Shyamalan presents parallels between the accelerated aging that takes place within the framework of a cinematic story and the illusion of plentiful time that enables most human beings to recognize the joys of aging only at the dusk of their days, when Minerva's owl at long last takes flight. In sum, Shyamalan's horror films *The Visit* and *Old* contemplate the fears of aging through meta-commentaries upon cinematic structure.

As an auteur, Shyamalan habitually preoccupies himself with the idea that spectators ought to coexist with the cinematic experience in a less plotted way and concurrently learn how to age more gracefully.[3] Shyamalan's thrillers condition spectators to confront the uncertainties of the filmic experience as a corollary of aging. Do not fear the future, the film insists, or let the past weigh too heavily upon you – instead, enjoy the temporal flow, aesthetically as well as existentially.

3 The type of work done in this chapter looks to uncover, in the words of Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "what gives an author's work its particular structure, both defining it internally and distinguishing one body of work from another" (qtd. in Wollen 2004: 567).

First, Shyamalan's recent films instigate living in the throes of time with an underlying confidence in a retrospective order to be imposed by the auteur's (in)famous twist endings. Second, these films ask the spectator to appreciate the fullness of cinematic moments – unedited; lived duration – as though they are a poetic gift: a romantic presentism that transcends the psychical confines of a skeptical age. Simply put, Shyamalan's working thesis is that cinema trains audiences to live in the moment.

Many of Shyamalan's films render literal the fear of aging by featuring characters that do not want to acknowledge their own mortality, from the ongoing denial of Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) in *The Sixth Sense* (1999) to the desperate question posed by Edward Walker (William Hurt) in *The Village*: who will be left to safeguard the utopian community once the elders have perished? The two films considered at some length in this chapter (*The Visit* and *Old*) heighten this simmering sense of dread by shining a spotlight upon the painful ailments of their senior characters. At the same time, many of Shyamalan's films compel audiences to consider the temporal nature of the film-going experience. Although a given film can certainly play with time – consider, for instance, flashbacks, or the ability for a film's jump cuts to advance a story from one point in time to a distant point in the future – no editing trick can slow the relentless march of time. Nothing can stop the end of the film from coming. Shyamalan ostensibly focuses so much of his attention on surprise endings in part because he wants the spectator to be hyperaware of this relentless march: the runaway sensation that undergirds the thriller genre. But alongside these acute feelings of dread, uncertainty, and relentlessness (primary feelings that accompany one's ever-advancing years), Shyamalan's films foster a blind faith in the cinematic flow – or, more specifically, in the cinematic flow of his own films, which appear to evade the acumen of audience members and defy strained efforts to anticipate the director's well-crafted plots. Find joy in the ride, these cinematic texts implore their audience. If Shyamalan's spectators accept this challenge, they can theoretically stop fearing old age.

Deep Moments

The Visit thoroughly establishes the concept of aging as an abject fear. One character observes, "People are scared of old people for no reason." From graphic displays of incontinence – when "Pop Pop" (Peter McRobbie) pushes the face of Tyler (Ed Oxenbould) into his soiled diapers – to the unsettling symptoms of dementia – when Nana (Deanna Dunagan) wields a knife and erratically wanders the house after 9:30 pm – Shyamalan's film amplifies the dread of getting older. The film concludes with an anxiety-inducing family game night in which, Pop Pop declares, "the young" must face off against "the old." During the final encounter, aspiring filmmaker Becca (Olivia DeJonge) encounters her Nana wrapped in a white sheet, donning the traditional garb of the costumed ghost, in a moment that highlights the closing act of the aging process, that is, death itself. Is Shyamalan an ageist because he depicts the elderly as objects of revulsion?

I would argue that *The Visit*, beneath its derivative stylization (it borrows heavily from popular found footage films like *The Blair Witch Project* or the *Paranormal Activity* series), is a thoughtful meditation on a latent link between the cinematic experience and the experience of aging. Like most of Shyamalan's thrillers, there is an uncertain future, a twist yet to come, and there is a disquieting past with which the characters must reckon in order to move on. As such, this film – like any film, really – pulls the spectator between what has happened previously and what still lies ahead. The audience watches as the aspiring filmmaker (Becca) constructs a linear narrative, with mounting tension and conventional beats. Simultaneously, though, Becca expresses a frustrated desire to evade such heavy-handed manipulation and swim instead in the waters of *cinéma vérité*. Early in the film, Becca commands Tyler to stop trying to make a swing move on its own: "Let it naturally swing." In a state of distress after showing her brother some of her naturalist footage, she asks him, "Are you consciously aware that that's my intention?" Becca wants to make a film that captures reality *as it is*, without her intervention, yet she keeps meeting strangers that consider themselves to be actors and mug for her camera. Given his own aspirations as a free-style

rapper, Tyler too prefers simultaneity to plotted design. In a perverse sort of way, then, these two young artists have much to learn from the murderous couple posing as their grandparents, since the elderly duo has lost all sense of linear time: Pop Pop repeatedly thinks he is headed to a costume party from his past, and Nana goes through the motions of an earlier life.

Although classical Hollywood cinema uses editing tricks to manage the spectator's experience of time, cinema also has the capacity to glimpse "real time" in the unaltered roll of the camera. Against the confines of the clock, a correlation between the artificial ways that human beings plot their own lives into concrete units (hours, days, weeks, etc.) and the artificial ways that directors move spectators through a film's ninety-minute run time, *The Visit* posits a different kind of cinematic experience, one that simultaneously invites a different experience of aging. Just as Becca utilizes her camera to bash open a lock and escape from the house of horrors, and just as Becca considers her film to be an "elixir" to help her family heal from a recent painful divorce, Shyamalan appears to believe that cinema promises a new approach to being in time. He suggests this new approach in at least two ways: first, Becca's "perfect cinematic images," her interstitial shots, or caesuras, that capture a still moment without the baggage of a weighty past or a loaded future; second, a surprise ending that retroactively imposes a sense of comfort that neither character nor spectator need worry because the auteur will inevitably instill orderliness and so the parties involved should learn to enjoy the flow and simply stay in the moment. Age is a mere number; indulge in the cinematic present.

The interstitial shots in *The Visit* speak volumes. Sometimes the camera lingers on the sky as it transitions from day into night. At other times, the camera lingers on the moon, in seemingly impossible shots because Becca is not allowed outside of her room after 9:30 pm. In these quiet moments, the film quite literally calls to mind the philosopher Immanuel Kant's rumination on the starry skies above: is one's expe-

rience of time subjective or objective?[4] In one sense, these artful shots mark the subjective passage of time, as the film moves steadily from one day to the next, the duration of the torturous visit being stressed in bold font (Monday Morning, Tuesday Morning, and so forth). These symbolist inserts contribute to a subjective sense of time passing that Becca – and Shyamalan – meticulously constructs for the spectator. In another sense, though, these pregnant shots evoke the fullness of the cinematic image as a temporal experience: one unedited roll of Becca's camera, usually focused upon a natural phenomenon that it is itself a sign of eternity and/or the cycles that comprise a steady, and arguably more objective, perception of time. As the film itself "ages," and moves towards its preconceived *denoument*, the audience is asked to stop anticipating the contrivances of plot – the terrors of a thriller's cadence – and revel instead in the capacity of cinema to convey the poignant stillness of an enduring presentism.

Shyamalan appears to be preoccupied with this approach to cinematic presentism. *Lady in the Water*, for instance, ends with a shot of the protagonist (Paul Giamatti) gazing up at the starry sky as his ward, the story itself (embodied in a character played by Bryce Dallas Howard), flies away. As the rapidly aging avatar for the film's story reveals, the cinematic experience is frequently a contrived race against the clock. But it offers a type of elixir, too, in the form of shots that convey something much bigger and (arguably) more objective: namely, a sense of being in time uninterrupted by subjective editorializing. Or one might consider the final shot of Shyamalan's *The Village*: the injured hero (Joaquin Phoenix) awakens to see the members of his village standing around him, suddenly hopeful of the future. The spectator shares the hero's gaze and she is meant to share in his renewed optimism as well. Prior to this shot, the elder statesman of the village (William Hurt) has forfeited his capacity to control, literally and figuratively, the clocks of his sheltered community. He has given up his valuable antique pocket watch in exchange for a life-saving medicine from the modern world,

4 As David Couzens Hoy writes, "The reality of temporality seems equally objective and subjective" (Hoy 2012: xv).

beyond the gates of his self-fashioned utopia. The sense of being in time within the fictional village, as well as within the film *The Village*, is a tightly monitored affair. The past and the future are almost always kept in their "proper" place. When the elder statesman gives up his watch, and accepts the risks of exposing the past and opening up to an uncertain future, he at last holds true to a creed that he has uttered several times throughout the film: "We are grateful for the time we have been given." In the closing shot of *The Village*, the spectator again appreciates Becca's "perfect cinematic image": a transcendent, evocative image that exists in "real time," somehow inside yet outside of the overly-curated rhythms of the typical Hollywood thriller. Although one might try to arrange one's life in a neat-and-tidy temporal package, one with a clear beginning, middle, and end, Shyamalan argues that cinema can expose audiences to a way of being present in the here and now.

The Visit doubles down upon this concept by employing found footage of the murderous Nana as well as home videos of the neglectful father. When Becca elects to insert home videos of her father, it is both an act of forgiveness on her part and, at the same time, a Bergsonian reminder that the past, present, and future forever overlap with one another. These private videos remain the past as well as the future of *The Visit* – and, ultimately, they are supposed to be viewed as yet another example of a deeper cinematic present. This sense of a deeper cinematic present captures something organic that cannot be plotted in advance. These moments are designed to look spontaneous, and they prove to be the very *cinéma vérité* that Becca has been seeking all along. She (and the spectator) are instructed to overcome their fear of getting older, that is, of living a life that feels too scripted and reaches a contrived conclusion, by appreciating the profound presentism on display in the unfiltered cinematic object. These images of the world are, as film critic Andre Bazin argues, "formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man." Bazin famously contends that "cinema is objectivity in time… the image of [things in] their duration, change mummified" (Bazin 2004: 168–169). Of course, these profilmic, "natural" events are always-already part of Shyamalan's larger design, and so the spectator might reasonably counter that the film's presumed presentism is only ever just another

illusion generated by the filmmaker.[5] Nonetheless, Shyamalan's found footage is meant to resolve the problem posed by excessive plotting.

The Visit inspires in its audience both a fear of aging and, concurrently, a faith in cinema's magical power to defeat death. "Time passing, duration, and change," Philip Rosen asserts, "are exactly what Bazin's ontological subject is driven to *disavow*, for they raise the problem of death" (Rosen 2001: 28, author's emphasis). By investing a great deal in deep moments, Bazin's imagined filmmaker strives to evade the haunting specter of aging and therefore exert "fantastic control" over the "causation of death" (23). Shyamalan and his mouthpiece Becca ask the spectator to endow the cinematic image with "an unprecedented credibility" and thus transcend her assumed anxieties about aging (23). That is to say, *The Visit* defeats its abject elderly subjects in the name of preserving cinema's capacity to defeat death, thereby re-enforcing Bazin's argument in regards to the central impetus of the cinematic medium.

Going with the Flow

At this point, let us turn to Shyamalan's signature move as an auteur: his unexpected plot twists. Since his inaugural film *The Sixth Sense*, Shyamalan has consistently quilted his films with unexpected endings that re-define everything that came before them. Such unexpected endings produce feelings of *uncertainty* in the audience about what is to come, and they also paradoxically produce feelings of *comfort* by promising that every event in the sequence of the film will eventually "make sense." To age alongside the unfolding of a Shyamalan film, then, is to confront the dread of endings, be they mortal or aesthetic. At the same time, the Shyamalan twist, which remains predictable that a spectator could set his watch to it, diffuses this dread by instilling in the story, retroactively,

5 Philip Rosen writes that cinema's ostensibly "fantastic defense against time" is in fact a construct: "There is something inevitably illusory in this apparently complete concreteness" (Rosen 2001: 21, 13).

a sense of order and purpose: "The active quest of the [spectator] for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of [viewing], promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle" (Brooks 1984: 19).[6] As Peter Brooks argues, "What remains to be [seen] will restructure the provisional meanings of the already [viewed]" (23). In Shyamalan's hands, a thriller's surprise ending doubles as a commentary about the experience of being in time: as the seemingly meaningless, random events that occur within a person's lifespan – or within the lifespan of a given narrative – invariably come together in a proper fashion, the character/spectator lets go of futile attempts to predict or plot the proceedings and instead focuses on enjoying the experience of the film, safe in the hands of a presumably loving auteur.

If my thesis proves correct, and one of Shyamalan's main preoccupations is the latent connection between the angst of aging and watching a film, then *Old* should be considered his crowning achievement. While films like *The Visit* gesture at this underlying schematic in a variety of ways, they do not directly link the running time of the film to the duration of a character's life. *Old*, on the other hand, makes this link quite literal: the spectator must watch as characters stranded on a mysterious beach grow older at an alarming rate. Indebted to Alfred Hitchcock, Shyamalan's films are metacommentaries about filmmaking and the voyeuristic pleasures as well as perversities of spectatorship. As a character in *Old* cries out, "Let's concentrate on the issue at hand: do you know about movies?" *Old* asks its audience to interrogate the fraught relationship between cinematic time and the various other ways in which characters/spectators might spend their precious remaining moments. An actuary (Gael Garcia Bernal) fights with his archivist partner (Vicky Krieps) over their conflicting attitudes about temporality: whereas the archivist accuses the actuary of obsessing over the future, the actuary

6 Frank Kermode adds, "[Men] need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. They fear it, and as far as we can see have always done so; the End is a figure for their own deaths (…) So, perhaps, are all ends in fiction" (Kermode 2000: 7).

accuses the archivist of clinging to the past (she only agrees to go to the mysterious beach because it will one day prove to be a "good memory" for her family). Meanwhile, Shyamalan makes familiar gestures at presentism: when the archivist interrupts the exuberant singing of her daughter in the back seat (Thomasin Mackenzie), her daughter berates her for stripping away the spontaneity of the moment; the actuary uncharacteristically saves his partner's life by making a "fast decision" to cut a rapidly growing tumor out of her belly; at the end of the film, the remaining characters wonder why they have been so obsessed with escaping from the beach – one character declares that "it's so beautiful" while the son of the actuary and archivist (Emmun Elliott) pauses during his escape from the beach to make a sand castle. A human life can feel a lot like a ninety-minute film in that the subject could feel compelled to either speed toward a redemptive ending or slow down the figurative runaway train. "Whatever is happening to us," a character complains, "is happening very fast." *Old* remains Shyamalan's most sustained attempt to date to condition its spectators to stop fearing old age and appreciate the present moment.

The spectator of *Old* remains both engrossed in the aging process and, concomitantly, estranged from it. To enter the experience of watching a film requires that an audience enter the flow of time as it has been generated by that particular film. Yet cinema also alienates spectators from their temporal norms by forcing them to reflect upon the artifice of man-made temporalities. On the one hand, "both in filming and projection, the cinema is a kind of clockwork mechanism, exposing and projecting immobile photograms at regular, equidistant intervals" (Lim 2009: 11). Through a plethora of techniques – parallelism, simultaneity, *leitmotifs*, and so forth – the filmmaker, like the elder statesman in *The Village*, "keeps time," in that he regulates the beats and cadences of the film-going situation. When a spectator walks out onto the mysterious beach alongside the characters in *Old*, she too must languish in the unique temporality of this suspenseful narrative. *Time grows ever shorter for characters and audience members alike.* On the other hand, cinema can "provoke a critical reassessment of modern time consciousness" (ibid: 11). After all, Shyamalan's spectator is never fully a part of the tribe

on the beach – she stands at the perimeter, watching, not unlike the scientists that stalk along the ridgeline and record their aging. "That's a camera," one of the watched characters breathes as they stare up the cliffs. "They're recording us." In a film, time is experiential as well as objectified. Cinematic time intermittently flows and freezes. Indeed, there is a dizzying moment in which the children chase each other in a game of freeze tag. The camera dollies through the sand, moving alongside the subject, and then it stops, suddenly, to contemplate the cinematically mummified figure at a distance. In this scene, the audience exists both inside of the film's temporal flow and, for a brief moment at least, outside of it, observing the film's movements from afar. The conundrum is that one never stops aging; time always passes, even during these "frozen" moments. Shyamalan's spectator is therefore implicated in the lived temporality of his film. In a revelation that must be troubling, if only because the film concerns a rapidly aging population, to watch *Old* is to enter, in many cases unwittingly, into "an encompassing temporal situation" from which there can no escape but to reach its terminus (Carruthers 2016: 29).

Reliant on the foundational work of Bazin, Lee Carruthers insists that film spectatorship "shows us time, not as something we know in advance, or master retrospectively, but as an ambiguous event that is opened up in experience" (ibid: 20). Shyamalan's *Old* enacts this ambiguous event by implicating the spectator in the experience of cinematic time not as something to be analyzed from afar, but something to be lived, in "real time." Carruthers employs the term timeliness to describe the immersive experience of time in a given film: "Timeliness frames the effort to enter into the temporal event that the film generates – because enduring that event, from start to finish, is itself a meaningful issue" (34). In the closing moments of *Old*, Shyamalan's spectator watches as waves slowly wash away debris on the beach. Having solved the puzzle of the beach at last, the two survivors swim through a strange reef, successfully evading the gaze of the scientist upon the hill (played by Shyamalan himself). Shyamalan's character stands behind an exaggerated camera lens, befuddled; the gaze of the film, too, scans the horizon, no longer able to track the characters. The spectator is meant to presume, however mo-

mentarily, that the sibling survivors have perished at sea. What endures beyond the frame? Or, more to the point, is there a way of being in time that exists outside of cinematic time?

The final shot of the film suggests that important lessons can be gleaned from Shyamalan's unique timeliness: the camera gradually drifts away from a helicopter in which the survivors must now re-orient themselves to a different experience of time, to a cadence that has not been set by meddlesome directors. The closing shot insists that the spectator look down upon the ocean, just as Shyamalan's enlightened characters stare outward into the blue beyond at the twilight of their lives, and she might (or so the logic of the film posits) start to appreciate a less plotted sense of being in time. As a character comments, "I want to be here… right now." For Shyamalan, cinema can heighten a spectator's fear of aging, but it can also alleviate this sense of existential dread by empowering the spectator to overcome their obsessions with past and future and embrace a deeper present. In other words, Shyamalan's spectator too could gaze gratefully upon the ebbs and flows of cinematic time instead of striving to solve the (impossible) "problem" of old age – a "problem" posited in mortal as well as aesthetic terms.

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