

Traumatic Seclusion in M. Night Shyamalan's Garrison Trilogy: *Signs* (2002), *The Village* (2004) and *The Lady in the Water* (2006)

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This paper argues that M. Night Shyamalan's *Signs*, *The Village* and *The Lady in the Water* turn around the need to find refuge from violence, in an updated version of Northrop Frye's garrison motif. The protection that these refuges offer is nevertheless put to the test by the presence of threatening, monstrous creatures. These creatures can be defined as projections of two traumatic experiences: on the one hand, the terrorist attacks of September 2001; on the other, and more significantly, the violence that, according to Shyamalan, is rampant in North American society.

Keywords: M. Night Shyamalan; cultural trauma; trauma therapy; violence; garrison mentality; monsters in film

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El aislamiento traumático en la trilogía de la guarnición de M. Night Shyamalan: *Signs* (2002), *The Village* (2004) y *The Lady in the Water* (2006)

Las películas *Signs*, *The Village* y *The Lady in the Water*, de M. Night Shyamalan, tienen como tema central la búsqueda de refugio ante situaciones de violencia y pueden entenderse como actualizaciones del *topos* de la guarnición según lo definió Northrop Frye. La protección que ofrecen estos refugios no es sin embargo absoluta y los personajes de Shyamalan deben enfrentarse a la amenaza de criaturas monstruosas que pueden entenderse como proyecciones de experiencias traumáticas, provocadas en parte por los ataques terroristas de septiembre de 2001 e, incluso en mayor medida, por la percepción del propio Shyamalan de una violencia social incontrolada en la sociedad de los Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: M. Night Shyamalan; trauma cultural; terapia del trauma; violencia; mentalidad de la guarnición; monstruos en el cine

M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999) was a phenomenal success in its narrative of the relationship established between Dr Crowe (the character played by Bruce Willis) and the child Cole Sear (acted by Haley Joel Osment) after Crowe's murder. Subsumed below this story is, however, one concerning Dr Crowe's wife (Olivia Williams) and her life as a widow, the particulars of which (her loneliness, her silences) are not fully comprehended until the very end of the film. Her plight is in fact a minor thread in the whole story, yet it seems to have been a persistent concern for Shyamalan, since it turned out to be a determining factor in three other films, where characters' actions are very much conditioned by their traumatic response to the acts of violence that led to the death of loved ones: in *Signs* (2002) the situation is caused by an accident; in *The Village* (2004), by rifle urban crime; and in *The Lady in the Water* (2006), by a murder that resembles that of Dr Crowe in *The Sixth Sense*. In these three films, the characters affected react very similarly in that they seek seclusion from the world in which these deaths occurred.

Trauma is generally defined as "the emotional wounds [...] left on the mind by catastrophic [or] painful events" (Davis and Meretoja 2020, xvii), but a more pointed definition must foreground the individual's inability to assimilate the traumatic event: as Kai Erikson argues, it is "a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively" (1976, 153). The trauma has a strong impact on the subject's psyche, but Erikson notes that its effects can spread to a collective and become "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (153-54). Failure to cope with the trauma results in the need to relocate any memory of the traumatic event in the subconscious, seeking refuge in psychic and social isolation. This is what the characters in Shyamalan's trilogy try to do. As with victims of trauma in general, however, their isolation offers only an illusory feeling of safety, and its ineffectiveness surfaces when they must face a more imminent threat, this time against themselves, in the shape of a violent, monstrous invasion. Their response to this new threat is to seek even more intense forms of seclusion, and the place chosen for their refuge after their first traumatic experience becomes a sort of garrison under siege. Both challenges seem to be resolved at the end, after the characters renew or strengthen their ties with those sharing their seclusion and collectively engage in a sort of non-violent resistance against external threats. Their re-socialization can be viewed as a positive step towards healing. Nevertheless, the fact that they choose to remain in isolation from the rest of the world ultimately suggests that they still see themselves as being under threat and, therefore, that their original trauma is not quite resolved.

These two layers of trauma can be identified as diegetic, as they concern the characters' own mental state and their relationship with other characters. But the motif

of the violence caused by alien invasion can also be read within the context of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11 hereafter) and the traumatic repercussions generated at a social and an individual level. This is a third traumatic layer, this time an extradiegetic one. The conditions leading to the generation and the resolution of the diegetic traumas will be discussed in the first part of my essay; borrowing Northrop Frye's definition of the garrison motif, I define them as garrison traumas. In the second part, I argue that Shyamalan's solutions to the threats featured in his trilogy can be read an endorsement of non-violent resistance and seclusion in the real world too; and that this position stands in clear contrast with the policy adopted by North-American institutions to define, control and ultimately heal the collective trauma generated by the terrorist attacks, a policy which supports the use of violence to eliminate all threats, regardless of where these threats may be.

I. GARRISON TRAUMAS

The term *garrison* defines the pros and cons of personal and social seclusion in Shyamalan's trilogy. With it, Northrop Frye referred to both a narrative situation and a mental state, hence his coinage of "garrison mentality," which he defined as a "deep terror" caused by threats posed by the outside world that prompts characters to seek refuge indoors and to shape this place as a defensive or military outpost (1965, 830). Originally the term applied to Canadian perceptions of a life-threatening wilderness and of the wild or "savage" creatures inhabiting it; but this garrison mentality has its representation in the literature of the United States too, particularly in popular genres such as the western or science fiction.¹

In garrison stories, the odds are against those who have sought refuge, a small community besieged by overwhelming forces. Their pervading pessimism is only tempered by a sublimation of the spirit of solidarity. According to Frye, the garrison "provide[s] all that their members have in the way of distinctive human values," and is premised on "a great respect for the law and order that holds them together" (1965, 830). The wilderness, by contrast, represents the absolute lack of these values; one of the consequences being that, when personified, the wilderness is presented as an inhumane, non-human or monstrous entity.

Frye's motif gives shape to Shyamalan's trilogy too. In these films, he features communities that have sought seclusion in their own "garrisons" and must confront a siege by monstrous creatures. What makes these films particularly interesting is that these monsters are also a phantasmagorical projection of the refugees' fears, whose real source resides not in the wilderness but in the "civilized" but extremely hostile world of the cities and human action.

¹ See, for example, Rebecca Weaver-Hightower's analysis of the garrison motif in settler sagas of the United States, Australia and South Africa as well as Canada, in *Frontier Fictions* (2018).

Signs is the earliest film in the trilogy. It is firstly the story of the trauma provoked by a familial loss, after the wife and mother of the Hess family dies in a car accident. Her death is an arbitrary one: a neighbor fell asleep while driving his car and ran over her. Her husband, Graham, cannot make sense of it, gives up his office as a pastor in the rural community in which they live, and secludes himself and his family—a brother and two children—in an isolated farm. Graham's trauma can be defined as vicarious: there was nothing he could have done to prevent his wife's death, but he nevertheless feels responsible because, as a pastor, he trusted that God could have; that He did not means that God is unjust or does not really exist. Graham therefore finds himself unable to continue his work for the community. His condition weighs heavily on the rest of the family, even though they appear to accept their isolation. Their acceptance is partly caused by their own personal shortcomings. Graham's brother, Merrill, is a former baseball player whose career was cut short after he broke his knee and resents being reminded of the golden opportunities he has lost; the daughter, Bo, has an eerie obsession with water and glass containers; and the boy, Morgan, suffers recurrent asthma attacks.

The weak stability and safety of their seclusion is further shattered when they feel the presence of intruders, and even more so when they realize that the intruders are not young pranksters but aggressive aliens from spaceships whose sightings are reported on the news. The puzzlement caused by the first news leads to uncertainty on how to proceed. The media soon cease to be reliable, the search for bibliographic material proves fruitless, and the opinions held by neighbors are useless or contradictory. Afraid of what may happen to them, most neighbors decide to leave; but Graham and his family choose to stay, hoping to find protection in their home.

Fight-or-flight is the natural, instinctive reaction to situations of danger. Flight is the better option if it secures the physical and mental integrity of the individual under threat. Fighting is the less desirable response, since it involves staying and confronting the threat and an uncertain outcome. Nevertheless, under specific, culturally determined conditions fighting may be understood as the more courageous, even heroic, alternative whereas fleeing can be construed as an implicit acknowledgement of defeat and failure, even a sign of cowardice. Between these two, however, there are other options, and Graham Hess chooses neither to fight nor to flee, but to hide and seek refuge at home. This does not seem to be a sensible choice, because the family will remain under threat.² Their decision, however, seems to make sense because what the invasion and the ensuing reports of alien abductions show is that the threat is global. Staying put

² The phrase "fight-or-flight" was coined by Walter Bradford Cannon in the early 1920s (VandenBos 2015, 155; 421). Since then, other terms have been attached to it to encompass further instinctual responses to danger; one of them, freezing, expresses "a severe reaction or fear response to a threatening situation" represented by "a form of passive avoidance in which the individual remains motionless and makes no effort to run or hide" (437). The Hesses' decision to stay could also be considered an instance of freezing, even if rationalized by the assumption that home could both protect and be protected by them.

also supposes not only that their home—their garrison—can be a protective place but also that they could protect it from invasion. It is tempting to concur with Kirsten Thompson's view of the Hess farmhouse as an iconic representation of the nation as a whole, "underscored [...] in its red, white and blue paint scheme, thus aligning the family within the national and global crisis" (2007, 129). But Graham is concerned not with the wellbeing of the nation as a whole but with the safekeeping of his family. As Elizabeth Abele argues, Graham's own "intense focus on his home" begins right after his wife's death, hence even before the film opens, and throughout the film the Hesses "specifically react to the threat to their home, not the planet" (2010, 14). Home is the site of family values; therefore they must stay in order to prevent its violation and, consequently, the undermining of the roots that define their identity as a family. Nevertheless, neither the house nor its residents fulfil their protective function: the aliens break in, and the family must seek refuge deeper and deeper inside, until they end up in the basement, without light, food, or information about what is happening outside. The darkness in the basement is the ultimate symbolic representation of defeat and death, the logical outcome in this kind of flight, all the more so because it is done without a fight.

Frye's definition of the garrison mentality does not exclude violence if it is exercised for self-defence. In Shyamalan's trilogy, however, fighting is practically never considered an option. Notably, once the Hesses take refuge in the basement, they find a large axe; but they use it to block the entrance to the basement rather than to fight back, and they leave it behind when, compelled by the need to find medication for Morgan, they return to the surface. Only at the very end does the film feature a scene of violence, in their encounter with a vengeful alien. Graham still tries to negotiate, but his brother attacks the alien and kills it. This is a justified action, not only because it is necessary in order to save Morgan's life, but also because it gives a meaning to the family's eccentric traits: it is prompted by Graham's recollection of his wife's last words ("swing away") and is facilitated by Bo's "prophetic second sight" (Thompson 2007, 137) which had led her to place water containers all over the house. Realizing that the aliens are scared of water, Graham tells his brother to swing away, and Merrill picks his baseball bat—which, hanging on the wall, had been a constant reminder of his failure as a player—and splashes the water of the containers over the alien. Graham views it all as a "revelation," coming to the conclusion that his wife's dying words are "a prophetic sign from God that has saved his family" (Thompson 2007, 128). The outcome of this final confrontation is Graham's resumption of his role as town pastor and the restoration of the confidence of the Hess family. The film thus offers a positive or optimistic resolution, but only of the earlier traumatic event. As regards the alien invasion, the film maintains its underlying pessimism, for there lingers the thought that the ships will return and the alien aggression will be renewed.

Part of the inability to respond more proactively to the alien threat in *Signs* comes from the characters' failure to produce a solid profile of the alien invaders.

They are at first presented—to use Kathy Smith’s definition—as “spectral” figures, a representation foregrounding their otherness: “the idea of something which is there and not there, something which has gone but has not gone, which is tangible and intangible, something which is a material representation of otherness, of alterity, of a liminal state” (Smith 2004, 44). The aliens are glimpsed as vaguely shaped figures moving in the background of blurred videoclips. Their elusiveness is enhanced by their ability to camouflage themselves, a resource they have also used for their spacecraft. The aliens only acquire full corporeality at the very end of the film. What can be perceived then is that they are anthropomorphic but not *anthropo-like*. Their otherness is supported by the fact that, although they supposedly belong to a technologically advanced civilization, capable of space travel, they wear no clothes. This gives them an animalistic profile, as creatures ruled by primal instincts, most preeminently by their aggressiveness.

Their animalistic aspect identifies the aliens as dangerous creatures *per se*, but they are also vicarious projections of the other, more persistent, cause of trauma, which is recurrently suggested but not seen on screen: the violence exerted in the real world which had first prompted the characters to seek refuge away from that world. In *Signs* that violence was accidental, but in the second film in Shyamalan’s trilogy, *The Village*, it is a central motif, although it is also kept outside the narrative, or only visible in very short flashes, and is thus silenced by the characters. The monsters in this second film are, however, a more evident manifestation of the effects of this violence, and as projections of these effects they share the same spectral qualities as those in *Signs*. Their elusiveness is also signified by their lack of identification as a species or, even less so, as individuals; they are just “those we don’t speak of,” a denomination that echoes what the community elders seek to achieve with regards to any mention of the “towns” (the world beyond the village) and what happened there. Like the aliens in *Signs*, the monsters in *The Village* are anthropomorphic but have animal features—specifically, a snout and large claws—and their natural environment is the forest, a bleak wilderness that surrounds and gives its name to the village, Covington Woods. Unlike those in *Signs*, however, the forest creatures show some degree of civilization, albeit minimal: they wear clothes and carry weapons, and they have supposedly reached a pact of non-aggression with the inhabitants of Covington Woods on the condition that people stay within the confines of the village and do not set foot in the forest, the creatures’ territory. Nevertheless, the villagers are in permanent fear of a breach of the pact and are forced to keep regular watch along their borders.

Patrick Collier observes that *The Village* “is replete with images of and references to borders and boundaries” (2008, 278), signalling the characters’ separation from an aggressive world. It was the same in *Signs*, as the Hesses’ farm is surrounded, and cut off from the rest of the world, by corn fields where the aliens roam freely. In *The Village* the forest is the first physical boundary; the second is the fence and the security outposts that enclose the Walker Nature Preserve, in the midst of which the village was erected;

the third, the distance that separates the village from the nearest urban centres. The function of each boundary is not exactly the same: the fence and the guards at the outposts are protective barriers against invasion from the towns, whereas the forest is meant to prevent any attempt by the younger members of the community to leave. It is also the only boundary the young ones know about, and its strength is reinforced by its also being a mental barrier, based on fear. The young of the village are constantly warned about what these creatures would do to them if they cross the village boundary. What they do not know is that the creatures do not really exist: they are costume pieces made and worn by the elders to scare the younger ones away from the forest. This is the most evident sign of the monsters' spectral, elusive nature. They may be glimpsed from afar, but must never be approached or contacted. Ideally, all the residents should be like the female protagonist, Ivy, an innocent, blind girl who can perceive no more than shadowy shapes.

The forest creatures are a protective construct too. Aleksandra Bida states that this is a "staged, and thus benign, fear," which the elders believe "will keep at bay the real malice and danger of encounters with strangers" in the urban world (2018, 84). Seclusion is key to a safe life in Covington Woods. It is also a learned drill against threats: whenever the alarm is sounded, warning people of the presence of the creatures within the bounds of the community, they must all seek refuge in the basement of their homes (like the Hess family in *Signs*) and wait for the all-safe signal. Attacking the monsters is never an option—for obvious reasons, since that could result in the ruse being discovered—but in any case it is never proposed by any member of the community, since violence must be avoided at all cost.

The community elders are determined to remain within the confines of their village and fully convinced of the advantages it offers. Halfway through the film it is disclosed that their leader, Edward Walker, had created Covington Woods and the Walker Preserve with the fortune inherited from his father after convincing the members of a therapy group, all of whom had relatives that had been violently killed, to join him.³ The towns are "wicked places where wicked people live," says one of the characters, and seclusion is their only protection against what those wicked people could do to them. Flashes of images of their life in cities show them dressed in clothes from the 1960s to 1980s. This a near past, and also a past whose conditions have not changed, as is shown in the newspaper reports glimpsed during Ivy's brief foray beyond the fence.

However, for the younger village inhabitants, who know nothing about the world outside, the temptation to cross the borders is constant and, one might imagine, increases as they get older. One of the earliest scenes in the film shows a group of boys testing their courage by stepping over the boundary and standing on forest ground for a while. As they believe that the forest creatures are real, their fear of an attack

³ This money comes from a big corporation. It can be inferred that the corporation represents capitalism and the dehumanization of modern people and therefore is the original source of urban violence, and that Edward Walker tries to make better use of it by bringing his community back to the purity of rural life.

or, worse, of a breach of the pact of non-aggression, is real too; but it is conceivably a matter of time before they realize that their trespassing has no such effect and that this will prompt them to move farther into the forest. The prospect of venturing beyond the borders is even stronger in Lucius Hunt (played by Joaquin Phoenix). His eagerness to leave is motivated by his desire to find medicines that could prevent ailments or even the death of some member of the community. Lack of medication is indeed the cause of one such death and is almost the cause of Lucius' own death after he is attacked by Noah Percy, a young man with learning disabilities who has violent outbursts. Although Lucius' proposal is reasonable enough, the elders reject it. Their decision is conditioned by their Sacred Oath never to leave the village, and also by what Bida calls their "isolationist philosophy," which is based on a "nostalgic return to the [...] comforts of solid modernity—a tie of greater certainties in terms of social relations and expectations" (2018, 82).⁴ To the elders, these comforts and certainties outweigh the benefits that might result from contact with the outside world. Their Oath is also a force that eventually becomes a prohibition to the whole community—under penalty of death.

Ivy's blindness and limited experience beyond the boundaries of the community guarantee also that she will not be "polluted" by the outside world. This is the main reason why she is the one selected when the elders finally relent and decide to send someone to the towns to collect the medicines they need. Once she crosses the fence of the Preserve, a providential encounter with a kind guard spares her a trip to the town. There is a suggestion, however, of what might have happened under other circumstances if she had been found by the other guard at the ranger station. What we see this guard reading in the newspaper also confirms that violence continues to be rampant in the "towns." Even if it may be surmised that the young ones' eagerness to cross the woods will not be assuaged in the future, the elders have their hopes set on the new leading couple, Lucius and Ivy, to preserve things as they are and to uphold the Sacred Oath.

Covington Woods is "a romanticized simulation of the past" according to Miriam Jordan and Julian Hanson Haladyn (2010, 175-76), and represents "a return to nineteenth-century utopianism, simulating a rural experience as an opposition to modern urban society," according to Diana Gonçalves (2012, 163). It provides an illusion of safety and innocence, which only pre-industrial rural communities were able to offer in the American imaginary. Nevertheless, it also evinces the contradictions of utopian fantasies: safety and innocence are maintained by means of lies, prohibitions, and fear; and cowardice and crime cannot be prevented. Shyamalan plays on these contradictions to foreground them, but ultimately seems to endorse the residents' isolationist choice. For the Covington Woods residents, and maybe for Shyamalan too, seclusion is the means to prevent violence and preserve peace. Violence cannot be

⁴ Following Zygmunt Bauman, Bida uses the term "solid modernity"—represented by the village in Shyamalan's film—to contrast it with the liquid modernity of urban areas.

averted absolutely, as Noah Percy's behavior shows when he tries to kill Lucius; but the threat posed by his aggression, which requires some sort of public punishment, is quite conveniently or providentially eliminated by his own actions when he accidentally falls into a trap and dies. The community can therefore continue as if violence did not exist within its borders.

In her analysis of *The Village*, Bida cites Zygmunt Bauman to argue that Covington Woods is the result of mixophobia, the rejection of strangers for the sake of safety and the "drive towards islands of similarity and sameness amid the sea of variety and difference" (2018, 64); the alternative is the submission to "an incapacitating fear of insecurity" (Bauman 2007, 66). In Bida's opinion, "it is this very fear that Shyamalan illustrates through the paranoid need of the elders to isolate themselves and their children from the outside world" (2018, 91) and their creation of "a non-religious, ethnically homogeneous, and supposedly classless American community" (95). But even if this effect can be perceived in *The Village*, it stands in stark contrast to the odd, multiracial community—"a variety of idiosyncratic residents," as Parker and Trivedi define them (2010, 90) of *The Lady in the Water*, the third film in Shyamalan's garrison trilogy.

The ideological radicalism of *The Village* is slightly tempered in *The Lady in the Water*, a "bedtime story" (the film's subtitle tells the viewer) of a young sea nymph, allegorically called Story, who seeks refuge in an apartment building. The name of the apartment complex—The Cove—is an evident recall of the name of the settlement in *The Village* and reflects its protective nature. Its architectural design evokes the shape of a real cove, too: the apartments are on three sides of a square, around a communal swimming pool; and the fourth side opens onto a back-garden. It seems to be a safe place, where neighbors can live in a sort of quiet isolation. Shyamalan's camera never strays away from the apartments, and virtually no activity outside the complex is shown, so the impression one has is that the residents never leave—or need to leave—the complex.⁵ But like the corn fields in *Signs* and the forest in *The Village*, the garden is a liminal and therefore dangerous space. It is an area into which the residents seldom step, constantly discouraged by the untimely setting off of sprinklers which create a permanent screen of rain. It is also the space occupied by this film's spectral creature: the scrunt, an animal that looks like a wild hog or a wolf and can camouflage itself in the grass, and which is also Story's nemesis. From the garden the scrunt can invade the complex and kill her and whoever stands between her and its purpose.

To Story, The Cove is indeed a haven, appropriately reached by water via the swimming pool, and a garrison, as she finds protection in it from the scrunt's attacks. It is also the place chosen by the central character, Cleveland Heep (played by Paul Giamatti), to seclude himself after his family is murdered. His trauma is repressed until, in a cathartic moment at the end of the film, he says that he "should have been there"

⁵ The exception is Young-Soon Choi, a university student who is briefly shown at a club somewhere in town, yet she is berated by her mother for the excursion and forced to return home.

to protect them. His feelings of guilt led him to give up his profession as a doctor and become a caretaker at The Cove, where no one knows his story.⁶ The building is very likely a refuge too for most of its other residents. It is certainly so for Mr Leeds, a former soldier who keeps himself locked up in his apartment watching news of an ongoing war and barely speaks to anyone except to ask questions such as “Does mankind deserve to be saved?” As for the rest of the neighbors, the reasons for their secluded lives may lie in their racial and behavioral traits. In one of the documentaries included on the DVD edition, Shyamalan comments that he wanted the residents to be expressive of the racial diversity of the country; but they form an odd and seemingly unsociable group of people. What they all seem to share, though, is an extreme degree of harmlessness; no one seems capable of causing or wishing pain to any other person. For this reason they may not have felt at ease in the world beyond the gates of the complex—and they possibly did not feel safe either, if not for the same reasons as Cleveland, perhaps because of the implications of the news about the war and military deployments of troops and weapons constantly shown on television. A further suggestion of the dangers outside The Cove is found in Story’s prophecy regarding Vick (the character played by Shyamalan), who will suffer a violent death at the hands of people who resent his proposals to improve living conditions in the world.

At first, the residents barely know—or wish to know or mingle with—each other. Cleveland stands as a paradigm of their isolation in the stutter he has developed following the murder of his family, hampering fluent communication with others. Their attitude stands in clear contrast to the spirit of solidarity that infuses Frye’s garrison mentality. It is not until Cleveland finds Story and calls for the residents’ assistance that their identity as a collective is formed. Remarkably, when asked to cooperate, the other residents show no reticence at all despite the oddity of the request. To help Story, the residents must take on one of several roles: the Symbolist must find the signs or symbols that indicate which character must be assigned each role; the Guardian will be Story’s protector; the Healer, the one who cures her from her injuries; the Guild, a group of “sisters” who channel their energy onto the Healer; and the Vessel, the one who will see a clear path to a better future. Their first attempt to help Story ends in failure because of mistakes in the assignment of roles; it is also evidence of their lack of mutual acquaintance with what each one can do based on their qualifications. Cleveland’s role is an instance of this failure, too. He is at first presumed to be the Guardian, but eventually he realizes that he must act as the Healer. In this new role he not only heals Story’s injuries but reconnects with his past as a doctor, overcoming his trauma. Healing her, he also heals himself.

Once their roles are properly reassigned, their joint work leads to success. Remarkably, here the scrunt’s final attack is also prevented through non-aggressive defence. The

⁶ This character’s name has a symbolic meaning. Story comments that the name makes her think of him as an inhabitant of Cliff-land, therefore as a man on the edge of suicide. The cliff stands in clear contrast with the cove.

Guardian simply stands before the scrunt and stares into its eyes, obstructing its passage beyond the boundary of the garden until the scrunt is carried away by other legendary creatures, the Tartutic. The nymph can return home at last, and there is hope that the alliance between humans and sea creatures will be restored and better days will come.

With this ending, the film offers the most optimistic resolution in the trilogy. This mood is in part demanded by its genre, a fable or a children's story. However, like in *Signs* and *The Village*, here war and violence will continue to exist; there will still be monsters outside and the neighbors will remain secluded in their small garrison. Their new ties will make them stronger and happier but not necessarily more willing to leave The Cove. Thus Shyamalan continues to validate the image of the garrison as the only protection against violence. But the flight into the garrison also involves a recognition of the failure to prevent that violence; as a consequence, it is the expression of melancholy—a common trait of all protagonists in Shyamalan's trilogy—and despair. The boundaries between the garrison and the outside world are dissolved only in *Signs*, and even so the threats posed by that world and the need to find a refuge remain in place.

2. RESPONSES TO TRAUMA IN THE POST-9/11 CONTEXT

Ansgar Nünning and Kai Sicks claim that human history is shaped by *turning points*, “crucial junctures and revolutionary ruptures in the continuous flow of historical developments” caused by, and provoking, radical social and cultural changes. They claim that these moments are “conceptualized as retrospective constructions of meaning” (Nünning and Sicks 2012, 2), hence are discernible only from the distance given by time. Nevertheless, they are associated with specific events that signal a cultural breach between the time before and the time after and become iconic or memorable; these are defined by Kathy Smith as *thresholds*. One such event is the 9/11 attacks, which “breached a threshold between fantasy and reality, redefining ‘reality’” (Smith 2004, 41). The impact of these attacks is unquestionable, but they are just one episode in a more elusive turning point which started before 9/11 and is still in progress, one that has close associations with our relationship with violence and aggression at both local and global levels.

Change and crisis are linked to thresholds and turning points. From a historical perspective, the focus is on the social or political consequences; but the most immediate effects concern emotional states such as uncertainty, anxiety and fear. These states can easily escape rational control and, when manifested at a collective level, are a major threat to social order. As such, therefore, modern societies have developed specific resources to control and minimize their effects. The 2001 terrorist attacks triggered one of these resources, namely, what Fritz Breithaupt (2003) calls the fabrication of the 9/11 trauma.

Strictly speaking, the 9/11 events were—like those affecting the characters in Shyamalan's films—traumatic only to the people who were in the places of the attacks

and survived or those who lost family or friends, perhaps even those who lost their property or their jobs. There is, nevertheless, what has been called social or cultural trauma, which occurs when, in what Jeffrey Alexander defines as an act of empathy and solidarity, the community assimilates the conditions of trauma of others and becomes traumatized as well (2004, 1). However, the perception and assimilation of cultural trauma is sometimes neither spontaneous nor automatic,⁷ and has to be created or—citing Breithaupt—fabricated. With this term, Breithaupt refers to the construction and definition of the traumatic event but also, and most importantly, of its effects: “The staging of trauma does not so much record the human suffering that has taken place but instead serves as the central axis of organizing the diverse information material in such a way to bring about the said response in the audience” (2003, 67).

This task is undertaken by political, legal and religious institutions (Alexander 2004, 15-21), but the mass media play a very important role, too; they are “the apparatus that makes possible the repetition of events, that amplify the magnitude of events, that offer events as an experience to those who were not present, and that bridge spatial and temporal orders (such as the past and present)” (Breithaupt 2003, 68). Alexander too asserts that “mediated mass communication allows traumas to be expressively dramatized and permits some of the competing interpretations to gain enormous persuasive power over others” (2004, 18). The role of the media after 9/11 consisted in persuading consumers that they were traumatized but not—for example—humiliated or defeated: effects such as these could have led to social chaos or collective paranoia.⁸ The media also took up the role of therapists, suggesting the most suitable responses to alleviate, if not to eliminate, the effects of trauma. The modulation of trauma can be understood as

a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences. Insofar as traumas are so experienced, and thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will become significantly revised. [...] Once the collective identity has been so reconstructed, there will eventually emerge a period of ‘calming down’. The spiral of signification flattens out, affect and emotion become less inflamed, preoccupation with sacrality and pollution fades. Charisma becomes routinized, and liminality gives way to reaggregation (Alexander 2004, 22).

One of the strategies developed to modulate the trauma of the 9/11 attacks was to foreground the role of those who most actively participated in the rescue of the victims,

⁷ Peter N. Stearns, in *American Fear: The Causes and Consequences of High Anxiety* (2006), contrasts the treatment given by the news to the events in 9/11 and the terrorist attacks in Madrid and London, which did not generate the same kind of response as they did in the U.S., arguing that fear has been overplayed in America.

⁸ Boggs and Pollard (2006) nevertheless argue that fear and paranoia can be generated by the media in order to modulate collective responses to situations of social stress.

sometimes sacrificing their own lives, by presenting them as heroes. Heroism was the defining feature of characters in films such as Paul Greengrass' *United 93* (2006) and Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006). But the realistic—if somewhat idealized—representation of such recent events was not palatable to many spectators, so the film industry also opted for “popular genres such as the science fiction thriller, fantasy, or even dramas on historic scenarios prior to 9/11” with stories that might be considered mere entertainment yet offered “solutions to alleviate the social fractures” caused by the attacks (Sánchez-Escalonilla 2010, 11). Films like Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012) and Jonathan Liebesman's *Battle: Los Angeles* (2011), featuring characters collectively confronting and defeating alien invaders, served this purpose.

The general plan in the fabrication of the 9/11 trauma has, however, not been fully successful. The shortcomings of trauma therapy have their most evident manifestation in the opposite of fantasy—nightmare—and in its most immediate effect—horror. They are recognizable in tales of flight or escape such as Steven Spielberg's *The War of the Worlds* (2005) and Shyamalan's own *The Happening* (2008). Films like this could be defined as stories of *outward exile*, as characters that have experienced a collective traumatic event flee from their homes, hoping to find asylum somewhere else. Contradicting the general plan of the fabrication of trauma, these films feature unheroic communities and foreground the prospect of defeat and despair. The horror caused by the event is increased by the characters' transition through places where civilization has collapsed and by the uncertainty of the place of asylum. In other films, however, what is told is an *escape into*, or an inner exile.⁹ This is the kind of story told by Shyamalan in his garrison trilogy. What I described in the first part of my essay is the way in which this seclusion is shaped and explained within the fiction; what I shall describe now is how it can be perceived within the cultural frame generated in the fabrication of the 9/11 trauma.

Signs is the film in the trilogy that seems to have the most direct connection with the 9/11 events. Although its script was written before the attacks, shooting the film began just three days after, and both Shyamalan and Mel Gibson (who played the part of Graham Hess) have acknowledged that the events had a strong impact on the team, as well as on the final shaping of the story.¹⁰ This impact can be perceived, for example, in the manner in which the main characters react to the news of the

⁹ For an analysis of some of these films and of their roots in American culture, see Sánchez-Escalonilla, “Hollywood y el arquetipo del atrincherado” (2009).

¹⁰ In an interview by Paul Clinton for CNN.com (2002), Shyamalan explained: “It was very difficult, difficult and meaningful [...]. It made the metaphor of the movie more real for us [...]. Everybody had lines that were ridiculously real for us. It was weird. Everybody was really shaken up.” And James Verniere reports in the *Boston Herald* how, when “asked if those cataclysmic events [of 9/11] changed him, [Mel] Gibson said, ‘I’m sure it did on some subconscious level. It’s interesting; I turned on the TV and watched it happen and then watched it again and again and couldn’t quite believe it. A numbness fell on me—and I didn’t realize the effect it had on me, except in retrospect. A state of shock, a still thing. And, of course, in the film you realize at the end, the man I’m playing is in a perpetual state of shock. He’s having a nervous breakdown beneath the very still exterior and I think that [Sept. 11] informed the performance somehow’” (2002, 13). See also Thompson, who claims that

invasion. As Thompson remarks, the TV room in the Hesses' home is "a ritualistic site for communal gathering, as it was in the days after 9/11" (2007, 139). In a clear echo of nearly everyone's response to the images of the 9/11 attacks, while contemplating the images of the alien ships and listening to the improvised comments of news reporters, the Hesses simply sit in front of the television set in a sort of paralyzing perplexity closely resembling catatonia.

As noted above, part of these characters' inability to respond comes from the spectral condition of the alien invaders. This situation also applied to the agents of the 9/11 attacks, subsumed under the generic label of Al Qaeda; and to the motives for the attacks, which were inexplicable to those who saw themselves as innocent victims.¹¹ In post-9/11 narratives this inability found its expression in a particular type of violent, alien threat. As David Higgins remarks, "part of what is striking about post-9/11 alien invasion narratives is that the alien is often incomprehensibly difficult to understand" (2015, 46). Their spectral otherness thus serves to establish a clear contrast with humans and what humanity represents. Shyamalan's binary opposition between the Hess family—representing us—and the aliens—the other—has evident resonance in the aftermath of 9/11, as it parallels the binary pairing of us (the U.S.) vs. them (Al Qaeda, the monsters). Their otherness might seem to justify the need to do away with them and, thereby, with the threat they pose. The Hesses, on the contrary, choose to flee and hide, rather than fight, and this sets them up as unacceptable role models.

The situation for the protagonists is not improved in *The Village*; rather, it is intensified by the use of the forest creatures as the source of collective fear and therefore as a justification for isolation. As Miriam Jordan and Julian Hanson Haladyn argue:

The simulation of evil and the manner in which the village elders use these simulations to create and maintain an artificial dichotomy between good and evil becomes more oppressive and terroristic upon the community than the evil that it is meant to defend against (2010, 177).

Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla states that, in *The Village*, Shyamalan draws "an allegory of American society entrenched within its own borders, dominated by a culture of panic that has ended up transplanting its fear of otherness to the legal plane" (2010, 15). Implicitly, it would seem that Shyamalan endorsed the policy developed by the Bush Administration to use fear as a justification for laws meant to strengthen and secure

"[t]he prominence of the visual dimension of 9/11 closely aligns itself with the central theme of *Signs*" (2007, 139-40).

¹¹ As Breithaupt states, "the most prominent and, so to say, appealing aspect of the ideology of 'trauma' is, of course, the innocence of the victim. It seems likely that the formation of 'trauma' as a cultural concept has been motivated and propelled by the attribute of innocence" (2003, 69). In this regard, see also Maggio (2007) for an analysis of how President Bush's "reality-creating" presidential rhetoric determined the view of the "enemy" after 9/11.

U.S. borders against alien invasion.¹² However, what this film warns about is that the real threat—and the real cause of fear—in American society is not the one posed by alien terrorists (that is, Al Qaeda or, now, ISIS) but by an enemy at home that is capable of violence at both an individual and an institutional level. The only way to avoid the effects of that violence is seclusion in an artificially created, Edenic community; but the cost is extremely high, for life in Covington Woods requires ignorance, fear and prohibition. This cost is, though, eliminated in *The Lady in the Water*, as the conduct of the residents at The Cove is not determined by any such agenda and there are no restrictions to what they may or may not wish to do within or outside the apartment building. Still, the world outside remains as violent, perhaps even more so, as in *The Village*. “[I]n a clear contrast with the message the magical person brings as well as with the attitude of the protagonists” (Sánchez-Escalonilla 2010, 16), the TV news reports indicate that aggression has become a global matter. Seclusion is still the best choice until a better world, based on what the Vessel/Vick/Shyamalan proposes, is created.

In Shyamalan's trilogy, the garrison is the opportunity for collective regeneration, based on mutual support and, particularly, the rejection of violence. Shyamalan's characters are non-aggressive, not because they are cowardly individuals, but because violence creates monsters and only monsters use violence. Nevertheless, seclusion may be still viewed as an unexemplary choice. In the context generated by the fabrication of trauma, which predicated the need to fight to defeat the enemy, very likely many spectators in the U.S. viewed retreat as unheroic and therefore as contrary to effective trauma-therapy policy.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The spectral representation of the monsters in Shyamalan's trilogy could be viewed as a critique of the fabrication of an imaginary, elusive enemy in order to maintain American society in a permanent state of fear and to justify such actions as the War on Terror, as Lauren Coats *et al.* argue (2008, 361). But the War on Terror is the direct consequence of the 9/11 *threshold*, whereas Shyamalan's concern redirects the focus onto a situation that fits Nünning and Sick's definition of historical turning points. As these turning points span over time, they are not easily perceptible to contemporary witnesses; but their effects can be seen and felt, and fear of the violence generated by/in our urban communities is one such consequence. The threats posed by Shyamalan's monsters reproduce the conditions that had led his characters to seek refuge in their garrisons in the first place. They have been forced to do so by other “monsters,” who live in the towns and cities of America. Shyamalan presents a gradation in their responsibility. In *Signs* this “monstrous” violence is accidental; in *The Village*, it is carried out by individuals;

¹² See, for example, “President Bush's Plan for Comprehensive Immigration Reform” in his 2007 State of the Union speech. Also, Arthur and Woods (2013) and Maggio (2007, 815-21).

in *The Lady in the Water*, it is also systemic. Significantly, these real monsters are the truly spectral ones, since they are never seen. Their spectrality, it could be argued, is Shyamalan's way of telling us that violence has become invisible to those who live in the cities, in the sense that it has been naturalized and accepted as a matter of fact in people's lives, so much so that those who eschew it and flee from it are regarded as social oddities. The entertainment industry has played its role in this naturalization. Boggs and Pollard argue that "violence easily takes on cathartic and redemptive features—in warfare as in movies" in American culture (2006, 349). They claim that, after 9/11, the film industry projected that violence onto what they call "the spectacle of terrorism," but that this was already "a central focus on Hollywood filmmaking" before 2001 and was "one reflection within popular culture of the increasing levels of political violence in American society, in US foreign policy, and across the globe" (335). Films like Whedon's *The Avengers* play on the thrills aroused by the exercise of violence and foreground it as heroic. In the context of post-9/11 trauma, fighting leads to success and power; flight, to failure. In Shyamalan's trilogy, with characters seeking refuge in places that are nevertheless besieged by new threats, there pervades a pessimism which is only slightly softened at the end of *The Lady in the Water*. The spectators of Whedon's film are gratified by the illusion that traumas like those provoked by the 9/11 attacks can be healed. In Shyamalan's, on the contrary, we are told that society has been sick with violence even before September 2001, that the sickness is growing, and that the trauma that it is generating will not be healed any time soon.

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