

Fake World

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

In M. Night Shyamalan's faux gothic film *The Village*, a late-19th-century community lives in enforced isolation; the deformed, bloodthirsty creatures who inhabit the woods outside the village prevent access to the world beyond. What makes the film an imitation gothic is the double plot twist. It turns out that the monsters are a fiction invented by the elders of the village to keep the younger generation within its boundaries. Further, we learn that the adults are refugees from present-day America whose experience of urban violence has driven them to revert to an 1890s lifestyle (their costume and manners actually evoke a period perhaps a century earlier).

With stars like William Hurt, Sigourney Weaver, Joaquin Phoenix and Adrien Brody rushing about in suspenders, aprons and yellow-hooded capes, and talking in inflated phrases without contractions ("I am but concerned for the safety of my only son"), the movie might suggest a *Saturday Night Live* version of the Amish. But Shyamalan isn't aiming for parody. Like his last movie, *Signs*, which featured supposedly technologically advanced unfriendly aliens who couldn't maneuver their way out of a locked room, *The Village* is a dead-serious attempt to comment on the spiritual emptiness of modern America.

Signs pivoted on the ability of its protagonist, a minister (Mel Gibson) plunged into disillusionment by his wife's senseless death, to reclaim his faith. *The Village* insists that we consider the retreat of the traumatized elders to the farthest reaches of a wildlife preserve as an honest effort to rediscover a family-centered, regulated and safe community. There's a great deal of unintentional humor in these films, but absolutely no irony.

Leaving aside the preposterousness of Shyamalan's plot (have the elders arranged it so that no planes ever fly over their village?), his social vision seems particularly dimwitted. Apparently the hopelessness and all-encompassing savagery of modern life can be redeemed only by a willful erasing of reality through the pretense that the modern age simply never happened.

The grisly fairy tales the elders enact to frighten their children into accepting their isolation don't seem like an attractive alternative. The movie never criticizes the villagers for maintaining the status quo through terror. And violence is, as we know, indigenous to human interaction. It is, in fact, a violent act that forces the schoolteacher (Hurt) to wise up his daughter (Bryce Dallas Howard) and allow her to journey into the world: when her fiancé (Phoenix) is attacked by a jealous rival (Brody), modern medicine is required to save his life.

The movie might make philosophical and emotional sense if it exposed the folly of setting up an alternative community and expecting it to be magically immune to human frailties. But Shyamalan fudges the situation by making Phoenix's assailant the village idiot, and therefore not responsible for his conduct. In the end, Howard secures the assistance of a sympathetic park ranger who secures the medicine and sends her back into the woods without giving away the secret of the village. His instinctual respect for her mysterious lifestyle—and the fact that the village escapes detection and is able to continue—confirms that Shyamalan finds the idea of reverting to another century to escape the challenges of our own perfectly congenial.

The Village doesn't appear to have snowed viewers (and some critics) the way *Signs* did; I think there's something about modern-day actors pretending to be some variant of puritans that makes it impossible for us to suspend our disbelief. (The fatuous remake of *The Scarlet Letter* and the painfully earnest film version of *The Crucible*, both released in the late '90s, were box-office disasters.)

Shyamalan enjoys respect because people think he's wrestling with important issues. But without the spectacle of Mel Gibson struggling with his faith, *Signs* might not have gotten away with its amateurish staging and imagery and its ramshackle narrative. (Those sophisticated extraterrestrials are defeated because they're allergic to *water*? Didn't they realize the planet they'd chosen to colonize was four-fifths water?)

The surprise ending of *The Sixth Sense*, the movie that put him on the map (and that, unlike his subsequent efforts, had at least the benefit of good acting), was hocus-pocus that viewers were less likely to dispute because the film, wide-eyed and humorless, gave the impression of grappling with our mortal fears.

Shyamalan is a hoax. Everything about *The Village* is faux.