

Needing a sixth sense

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 10, 1999](#) issue

*The Sixth Sense* (1999), directed by M. Night Shyamalan

A few days after my second viewing of the film *The Sixth Sense*, I was reading R. P. Blackmur's book about Henry Adams, in which he laments the disappearance from modern consciousness of the ability to "express human reactions and aspiration in terms of great symbols." That idea resonated with a discussion I had led about the film.

Some participants in that discussion found it difficult to appreciate the film's insights because they were put off by the plot's premise that people may possess strange powers. I am not sure I will be able to convince these people to change their minds, but I believe Blackmur can at least be helpful to the conversation. He argues that in the 19th century symbols began to lose the ability to do what they are supposed to do: touch that which cannot be grasped rationally. We need symbols, Blackmur writes, to deal with "the power of the occult, the mysterious, the unknowable." If symbols are held to the rational level of thought and feeling, then art loses its power to affect us.

Even commercial films have the capacity to touch us at a symbolic level, and therefore at a deeper level than we generally realize. This is the case with *The Sixth Sense*, which was a huge box-office success, leading all other films for five straight weeks this past summer. It was directed and written by M. Night Shyamalan, 29, who has a three-year-old daughter and a wife who is studying to be a child psychologist. He says this background helped him in writing the role of the child psychologist, played in the film by Bruce Willis. Born in Madras, India, but raised in Philadelphia, Shyamalan is a Roman Catholic. His parents are Hindus.

His earlier film, *Wide Awake*, deals with a ten-year-old boy's search for God. The plot of *The Sixth Sense* is, by now, well known, though there remains an unspoken pact among those who see the film not to discuss its ending. It features the interaction between a psychologist and a nine-year-old boy troubled by the conviction that he is visited by "dead people." At the beginning of the film we learn that one of the

psychologist's earlier patients accused him of "failing" to help him, and this failure haunts the doctor as he attempts to aid his new patient. One of the boy's encounters with what he insists are dead people is one of those symbolic moments that I think Blackmur would agree is charged with a depth that rational thought rejects.

The moment involves a message from beyond the grave delivered to the boy on a videotape, a message that helps explain a death. Of course the rational mind rejects this experience as just so much movie "stuff."

But consider that viewers and readers of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* usually accept as a legitimate dramatic development the sequence when the spirit of Hamlet's dead father appears and asks Hamlet to take revenge against the new king, who has murdered him and married his wife. This moment is pivotal to the drama and long has been regarded as a symbol of the mysterious and the unknowable.

What is the difference between *The Sixth Sense* and *Hamlet* that makes the modern viewer accept the irrational in one and reject it in the other? Modern audiences accept Shakespeare's tales of witches, dead kings and other mysterious goings-on. Why do we not grant the same artistic license to modern filmmakers? Because, I would submit, we do not consider symbols that suggest a mystery beyond our rational grasps of reality as appropriate.

That we again learn to appreciate such symbols is important, not just because we will live richer lives if we remain receptive to the power of art in its many forms, including film, though that is certainly true. No, there is a larger reason. If we cannot transcend the limitations of our rational mind-set and bring the power of the imagination to bear on the complexities and ambiguities of the personal, social and political issues we face, then we have chosen to fight our contemporary battles with one hand tied behind our back.