



PROJECT MUSE®

Folklore/Cinema

Sharon R. Sherman, Mikel J. Koven

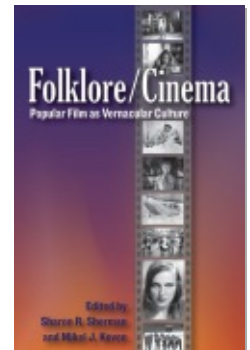
Published by Utah State University Press

Sherman, Sharon R. and Mikel J. Koven.

Folklore/Cinema: Popular Film as Vernacular Culture.

Utah State University Press, 2007.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/9394.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9394>

Access provided at 6 Apr 2020 19:00 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

“Now That I Have It, I Don’t Want It”

Vocation and Obligation in Contemporary Hollywood Ghost Films

JAMES A. MILLER

WHAT MAKES *HAMLET*'s ghost so memorably disturbing, for audiences as well as its unwilling interlocutor? Jacques Derrida has pointed out in *Specters of Marx* that the ghost's inscrutable form and ambiguous provenance are crucial to its power. We grasp, with Hamlet, the familiar lineaments of a demanding father, yet “that does not prevent him from looking at us without being seen: his apparition makes him appear still invisible beneath his armour” (1994, 7). We “do not see what looks at us,” and this “spectral asymmetry” grants the ghost's implacable gaze the power to judge the living (1994, 7). In the end, then, the haunting figure's forceful and commanding voice remains with us. “Pity me not,” it intones, “but lend thy serious hearing to what I shall unfold” (1.5.5–6). The ghost's words imply an ethical imperative: they demand that Hamlet must attend to its message, interpret its exhortations, and act decisively on that knowledge. This obligatory dimension of Hamlet's spectral encounter makes it a locus of unease for viewers. Whatever we may think of the Prince of Denmark and his troubles, we are also encouraged to consider what, if anything, the past demands of us.

Hamlet's ghost poses a question about obligation that is both profoundly traditional and deeply resonant in our contemporary popular culture. It may at first appear difficult to hear the question in today's haunted media, where not all ghosts are taken so seriously. Two of the most memorable ghost films of the 1980s—Ivan Reitman's *Ghostbusters* (1984) and Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1988)—even treat the ghostly with parodic levity. No “pity” or “serious hearing” for Reitman's ghost-troubled urbanites; instead, they simply call on paranormal professionals, whose work has all the banality of pest extermination. Somewhat similar in tone, *Beetlejuice* reverses the usual genre formula by having

put-upon ghosts appeal to a spectral bureaucracy for help with their invasive “living family” situation. As is typical when one has to deal with bureaucratic red tape, the solution turns out to be more trouble than the original problem.

In both films, the supernatural event presents an ideal occasion for ostentatious displays of special effects. Linda Bradley has commented on the striking prevalence of *ectoplasm*—concretely visualized spectrality—in 1980s ghost cinema. In this period, she argues, “ghosts became inconceivable unless embodied” (1995, 44–45), thus diminishing their discursive potential in favor of self-consciously visualized spectacle. The ghosts in *Ghostbusters* are a famous example of this trend because they are explicitly objectified as phenomena (or special effect) without roots in history or memory. And while Burton’s *Beetlejuice* is more complex because the ghosts have recognizable human desires, there is an ironic undertow to its repetition scenario. In one sense, as Katherine Fowkes has shown, the Maitlands (the primary ghost figures here) can be read psychoanalytically as masochistic figures that return “after the fact...to repeat the original fantasy of the birth of the subject” (1998, 83). Yet their repetition/return evokes only a circumscribed and private history, one that can make no demands on the present.

Several critics have argued that seemingly innocuous films like *Ghostbusters*, along with more conventional horror fare including *The Changeling* (1980), *Ghost Story* (1981), *Poltergeist* (1982), or *The Lady in White* (1988), all articulate a disturbing message about political quietism. Alan Nadel’s analysis of the political construction he calls “Reagan’s America” is the most detailed explication of this position. For Nadel, Reagan’s political vision was the worst kind of dishonest Hollywood confection, a debasement of the materiality of historicized experience into pure escapist narrative, abstracted from the unpleasant details of everyday life that the Hollywood engine works overtime to obscure. Given this, Nadel argues that the real corporate Hollywood products of the time, including popular ghost films like *Field of Dreams* (1989) or *Ghost* (1990), line up to parrot the illusory promises of the administration (1997, 48–85). In these films, the emphasis on spectacle displaces more troubling historical questions by visualizing the past as a mere inconvenience (or an active threat) to be diverted or defeated. With the unwelcome pressures of history conveniently removed, Hollywood’s victorious heroes return to the “business as usual” of consumer-culture complacency and implicitly authorize their audiences to do the same.¹

This model is too monolithic. Several ghost films resist the tendency toward ahistorical cynicism by attempting to reanimate the far older

folkloric idea that the spectral encounter may be seen as a conversational dialectic between claimant and interlocutor, obligation and resistance. Popular films like *Field of Dreams* and *The Sixth Sense* (1999) evince serious interest in an ancient fixture of ghost tales: the man or woman set apart, an intermediary between the living and the dead. They explore a "vocational crisis," portraying the ambivalence of the priestly figure as a person whose responsibility to the past is necessary for cultural survival yet may require a disturbing sacrifice of the self. Viewers are encouraged to ask, "What does it mean to live *now*, during this particular moment in history? What, as a human being, do I owe my fellow audience members and the dead who have made my existence possible?" The vocational or priestly figure attempts—not always with great success—to answer these questions by acting as a physical representation of the viewers' necessary attention of self to "other."

Literary scholars today are probably most familiar with a ghostly tradition emerging out of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic aesthetics, and later, twentieth-century psychoanalysis. From Horace Walpole and Friedrich Schiller to Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens, from Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) to the late stories of Edith Wharton and Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), literary ghost fiction has developed toward a fatalistic sense of powerlessness and isolation. Twentieth-century tales, in particular, tend to depict the ghost as the precipitant of an intense individual crisis of psychological and spiritual nature and reveal a world where neither institutional nor marginal social structures can offer solace. This tradition presents a parallel to modernist literary themes of isolation, anxiety, and despairing secularization. Unlike the Sartrean leap of faith that authorizes productive individual choice and self-generation out of the void, these narratives underline the essential helplessness of human agents at the mercy of an indifferent universe.

The idea of spectral encounter as impetus for existential crisis is already implicit in Sigmund Freud's conception of the *uncanny*. Freud theorizes that the uncanny feeling inherent in repetition compulsion leads us back to an ancient, supposedly rejected, animistic worldview:

Our analysis of instances of the uncanny has led us back to the old, animistic conception of the universe, which was characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings, and by the narcissistic overestimation of subjective mental processes (such as the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts, the magical practices based upon this belief)...It would seem as though each one of us has been through a phase of

individual development corresponding to that animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has traversed it without preserving certain traces of it which can be re-activated, and that everything which now strikes us as “uncanny” fulfils the condition of stirring those vestiges of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression. (1995, 141)

Freud implies that the spectral encounter is one with the problem of being itself—that to engage with the ghostly is to question all social, psychological, and ideological order. The radically decentering potential of his thought has been widely influential. Indeed, Freudian conceptions of the supernatural are so entrenched that it is difficult for some people to perceive anything *other* than existential dread in today’s ghosts.

In this spirit, it is possible to construct, as R. C. Finucane has done (1996, 90–116), a unified historical model that can trace the roots of our modernist (or post-modernist) anxiety to a specific historical moment—for example, in the sixteenth-century witch-trials era, when ghosts become a locus of intense existential and political debate. Are they (as Reginald Scot insisted in his 1584 *Discoverie of Witchcraft*) merely the fantastical projections of credulous minds, who behave “as if they were babes frayed with bugges” (quoted in Finucane 94)? Or are they evidence of the malignant influence of demons and devils, according to none other than King James’ *Daemonologie* (discussed in Finucane 95–96)? Both Scot and James associate ghosts with deception, anxiety, and exploitation: the traditional sense that the spectral is part of intelligible communal experience is nowhere in evidence. The danger of this sort of historical analysis is that it can imply an evolutionary trajectory from tradition to modernity, leaving older experience of the spectral behind.

Unsurprisingly, folkloristic discussions of the ghost often take quite a different approach. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the ghost in traditional societies, in the West and elsewhere, is its functionality. From this perspective, the spectral is not a threat to society but a problem to be addressed through communally sanctioned action. Further, the ghost may be grasped as a rhetorical tool, a mechanism through which pressing localized social issues may be articulated and debated. Timothy Tangherlini has explored this pattern from a folkloristic point of view in his study of nineteenth-century Danish ghost legends, wherein the haunted turn to ministers, folk healers, or others with experience of the supernatural. In the Danish folk tradition, Tangherlini argues, competing claims to ghostly expertise express different attitudes regarding institutional social power, and ghost legends emerge as oral performances that concretize political debate (1998, 155). Some tales support

the cleansing powers of the local ministerial elite and, by extension, the nineteenth-century Lutheran church, and behind that the Danish crown and legitimate state power (1998, 160–61). Other tales perform an explicitly subversive function: when religious leaders *fail* to deal with ghostly threats, the culturally marginal folk healer or beggar steps in, thus creating a critique of authority (1998, 164–65).

Tangherlini's observations are echoed by Gillian Bennett's study of contemporary ghost memorates from the 1980s in *Alas, Poor Ghost* (1999). She outlines the competition between two cultural traditions, one of "rationalist disbelief" and the other of "belief." Crucially, both traditions can be analyzed rhetorically as they draw on oral conventions of performance, argument, and social interaction. Bennett's insights are threefold: first, she understands that both belief and disbelief are historically and socially mediated positions from which emerge individual performances (conversations, social interactions, and artistic productions like films). Her ethnographic research establishes that both traditions are vibrantly active in contemporary Western, urban, everyday life. Second, Bennett shows that both traditions produce positive cultural results: in folkloristic terms, they serve the psychological and social needs of individuals (1999, 31–38). And finally, she points out that many contemporary oral ghost narratives emphasize the continuity and effectiveness of the community and literally *embody* that continuity through the act of storytelling itself. These oral performances describe a world that *works*. Life and death are grounded in an intelligible order of creation, rather than being mere accidents of biology. Human intimacy is remembered and cherished, and justice emerges as the comforter of the weak and bereft (1999, 25–28, 51–66). In the modern era of corporate hegemony, rampant militarism, and widespread political cynicism, the vision of intimate community offered by Bennett's memorates is incredibly appealing and, of course, highly marketable.

In recent cinema, a guarded return to something resembling this traditional model, one that has, after all, never really disappeared in popular folk practice, is also apparent. These films depict a concern with intermediary figures—priests, cunning folk, mediums, converts, and the like. In so many of these films, the grudging admittance of an individual's limits finally results not in existential despair but a discovery of that yearned-for and feared mediating authority within the self. But the key to the vocational theme is that the discovery of secret reserves within, of the ability to mediate between our world and the other, implies a deliberate rethinking of the individual's relationship to the social order. Once the contemporary hero admits the claim of the spectral, an inevitable and ongoing

vocation follows, a duty that is understood to continue long after the narrative proper has concluded. The nascent sense of public obligation, and historical consciousness, can be read in implicitly political terms.

These crucial concepts—*obligation*, *vocation*—are in some ways acutely unfashionable, implying to some people an unwelcome, coercive force. Indeed, they may resemble a strand of Catholic piety that privileges the romance of self-sacrifice. Certainly the Catholic tradition offers a variation on the theme, and as we will see later, several recent films make explicit (if sometimes ironic) use of it. The vocational perspective also has a philosophical inflection, for example, in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, whose sometimes astonishingly extreme claims for interpersonal ethics consistently betray evidence of obligatory thinking. For Levinas, the ethical question is primary and above all others and is grounded in the exchange between self and other: “[It is] as if the proximity of the other man...his face, the expressive in the Other...were what *ordains* me to serve him” (1982, 97). The intensity of this appeal, and the sheer weight of the obligation, are precisely what make the vocational theme so powerful in spectral narratives. Through it, storyteller and listener, filmmaker and viewer can meditate on the ambiguous claims of social order: of a child on its mother, a parent on its child, a community on its people, the past on the present.

Looking back to Nicolas Roeg’s 1973 *Don’t Look Now*, adapted from Daphne du Maurier’s novella (1971), one can see an early expression of a theme that is strikingly common in more recent ghost films: the struggle against vocation. John (Donald Sutherland) and Laura (Julie Christie) are a couple dealing with the recent death of their daughter. Laura, at first the most obviously affected of the two, meets an over-the-top, classic-ghost-story medium, whose assurances of her daughter’s happiness allow her to begin taking charge of her life once more. By contrast, John chooses to bury his suffering in his work. As a restorer of old church buildings, he rescues images of the dead, a powerful visualization of sublimated, secularized vocation. He cannot accept the past in any but a purely instrumental sense: as a rapidly decaying legacy of stone monuments and empty symbols that nevertheless pays the bills. But John is also gifted with an unwanted second sight, the ability to see into both past and future—the vocational function articulated in genre terms. His own unconscious quietly insists on the obligatory impact of the past on the present. John absolutely refuses this lesson, and the unwillingness to accept a vocational responsibility leads to his own death.²

Don’t Look Now may be the most extreme example of the tendency for recent vocational figures to resist their calling, but it is actually a

pervasive theme, even visible in the popular *Ghost*. Whoopi Goldberg's Oda Mae, a fake medium, is horrified to discover that she can hear spirits of the dead. Far from legitimating her already-successful spiritualist practice, this unexpected revelation is an unwelcome imposition. At one point she says, "My mother had it, my mother's mother had it. Now that I have it, I don't want it." A reasonable desire, yet the film's titular ghost literally torments her into submitting to her gift. Once she assumes the vocational role, ghosts crowd Oda Mae; her body and identity are subsumed by an unwanted possession not unlike rape.

This element of the film has generated the most criticism, and justifiably so. The narrative, read this way, is essentially about the struggle of a Hollywood, white, middle-class couple to achieve psychological wholeness. They achieve this goal not only through the (initially unwilling) aid of a black woman but explicitly through her possession, or more precisely, her erasure. Yet while it may be true that Oda Mae is eventually enlisted to serve the white patriarchy, at the same time, her struggle—her vocational crisis—is quite genuine. That this is all made comfortably "Hollywood" by the end, and that her struggles against vocation are all played for laughs, do not hide the fact that her gift may be a curse.³

Oda Mae's dilemma in *Ghost* is strikingly similar to the situation in *Stir of Echoes* (1999), another ambivalent take on the vocational motif. Tom (Kevin Bacon), the blue-collar hero, is frustrated by the tension between familial expectations and his creative desire to make music. At first the film seems to be about the need to put aside his extended adolescence and shoulder adult responsibilities. Yet Tom's sister-in-law, Lisa (Illeana Douglas), who sees herself as a cosmopolitan, modern person, constantly points out his supposedly bland, unquestioning blue-collar everydayness. In an early scene, she says, "You know, this may come as a surprise to you,...but just because you've knocked around the same six blocks your whole life doesn't mean there isn't a whole larger world out there...doorways you haven't even opened." In the following sequence, Lisa hypnotizes our hero and suggests that he "open up." The result is that Tom becomes uncomfortably aware of ghostly presences and is eventually forced to act as a mediator, righting a wrong that allows a tormented spirit to be appeased. In gendered terms, the repressed male is opened up to the personal in others and acts out the nurturing role he resists in his everyday family life. Conversely, the sequence is an expression of the tensions inherent in the vocational theme.

As in *Ghost*, the mediator's identity, once assumed, is acutely oppressive. Why? The film suggests that the vocational burden is, in part, a threat to the self. This insight is expressed most clearly in the

last shot. As Tom and his family drive away from the familiar neighborhood, their son Jake (Zachary David Cope)—himself on the verge of vocational crisis—watches the houses flash by, each full of unwelcome ghostly demands. In a futile gesture of self-assertion, he covers his ears, unwilling to face the obligatory weight of the past.⁴

Recent films offer more positive resolutions of this vocational ambivalence, nowhere so successfully (or at least economically) as in *Field of Dreams* and M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*. *Field of Dreams* focuses on the plight of Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner), who has spent a lifetime experimenting with utopian alternatives to mainstream American ideology. Initially he sought refuge from the banal in a mildly rebellious flirtation with California's 1960s counterculture. Disillusioned with that experiment, Ray married and bought an Iowa farm, aligning himself with an embattled agrarian idealism under threat by the economic realities of Reagan's America. But by the time of the film's action in the late 1980s, Ray has matured enough to understand some of the anxieties that fuel his choices: "I'm 36 years old; I have a wife, a child, and a mortgage, and I'm scared to death I'm turning into my father...I never forgave him for getting old. He must have had dreams, but he never did anything about them....The man never did one spontaneous thing in all the years I knew him."

The context of the speech is domestic, but it is also a thinly veiled comment on contemporary social and political complacency. The culture, he seems to be suggesting, has lost the capacity to imagine utopia. His wife, Annie (Amy Madigan), deals with the same desires and anxieties and is allowed one moment of resistance to the social complacency of the era. At a PTA meeting, where local prudes have collected to suppress the work of radical '60s activist Terence Mann, Annie has a chance to speak out for progressive values. Her utopian ideals are represented in familiar Hollywood shorthand: "It's like the '60s again!" she enthuses. At least some sort of (vaguely) political alternative is given a hearing.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the film's answer to America's social and political malaise turns out to be patently absurd. While facing foreclosure of his farm, and by extension the agrarian vision that initially fueled his embrace of domesticity, Ray hears voices that tell him to plow under his crops and build a baseball field. The act is irrational, as Ray, his family, and the community perfectly understand. But critics like Alan Nadel (1997), Molly Rothenberg (1997), and Thomas DiPiero (1997) have resisted the sentimental appeal of this gesture. Instead of confronting honestly the social and economic realities that have led Ray's farm (and the nation) to the brink of collapse, we are asked to

subscribe to a fantasy of redemption where the failures of the past, of the domestic and political promise of America itself, is assuaged through intense wish fulfillment.

When the film tries to use its fantastical premise to deal with more complex political issues (race, gender, the less co-opted elements of '60s radicalism), the essential confusion of its thinking is revealed, and we are left with sentimentalism verging on materialist cynicism.⁵ Yet *Field of Dreams* is also about the possibility that moral and spiritual complacency *can* be transcended through a secular variation on what Flannery O'Connor called *grace*, the voice in the wind that quietly ruptures the surface of everyday life. The film also enacts a traditional conversion narrative, though in thoroughly modern terms. The hero is quite literally called to a vocation, struggles with that calling, and then risks everything to accomplish his mission. This pattern of behavior fulfills the traditional function of the vocational figure: to address the concerns of the dead and, in doing so, to bring history into living communion with the present.

The Sixth Sense, by far the most commercially successful ghost film of recent years, is also the most completely realized example of the vocational theme I have been describing. Shyamalan's tendency to rely heavily on extremely manipulative identification techniques and his preference for gimmicky surprise endings or last-minute twists have tended to obscure his films' more significant content. But just as there is more to Hitchcock's formally experimental *Rope* (1948) than the attempt to make a commercial one-shot film, so *The Sixth Sense* does turn out to be *about* something worthwhile once you get past the tricks. The opening sequence introduces Malcolm (Bruce Willis), a successful child psychologist and recent recipient of a citation from the city of Philadelphia for service to the community. Shyamalan explicitly marks Malcolm as an intermediary figure intent on healing broken children: a committed representative of the community working toward a viable future through the judicious purging of the traumatic past. Yet those he could not help haunt Malcolm, notably Vincent Grey (Donnie Wahlberg), whose psychotic act of violence toward the surrogate father figure who has failed him inaugurates the more explicit structure of the narrative. Malcolm spends most of the rest of the film attempting to assuage his guilt for failing Vincent by helping Cole, a similarly disturbed child going through a parallel experience of divorce, familial breakdown, and resultant psychological collapse.

But in this opening scene, Malcolm's wife, Anna (Olivia Williams), remarks, "They [the city] called you their son." This line hints at the

reversal strategy that determines the structure of the rest of the film: the father is also the son. While *The Sixth Sense* may at first appear to be primarily about Malcolm's parental and professional guilt, the more crucial narrative strand emphasizes the child's struggle. The film presents a vocational figure in Cole, the "gifted" child tormented by the unending desires of the dead to be heard and appeased. In the end, he accepts the burden of being a mediator, easing the suffering of both the living and dead and (crucially) explicitly accepting that these acts of kindness are not isolated instances of heroism but the first steps to a lifetime vocation.

Strikingly, most reviews deliberately deemphasized Bruce Willis's star turn in favor of Haley Joel Osment's remarkable performance as the gifted child. I think that this reflects not only the quality of Osment's work but the ideological slant of the film: it focuses unerringly on the *vocational* crisis. When the dubious pleasures of decoding the rather heavy-handed symbolism and clues that set up the surprise ending have begun to pall, there remains a resonant domestic drama with wider sociopolitical implications, one that uses familiar folkloric motifs to do its work.

A close reading of the film with the vocational theme in mind unearths numerous resonances. Can it be an accident that the film first depicts Cole fleeing into a church, echoing the heroes of centuries of ghost legends, who similarly seek the comfort of sacred ground and traditional knowledge? Or that two of the most important encounters between Malcolm and Cole play out in exactly this ancient place of refuge for the desperate? In the first church encounter, Malcolm underlines the traditional meaning of Cole's attraction to the sacred: "You know, in the olden days, in Europe, people used to hide out in churches. They would claim sanctuary." Much later, the two return to the church for a more open discussion, where it is suggested that the surest way to deal with ghosts is to "listen to them." A priestly representative usually, but not always, frames this precise statement of the vocational function. It seems appropriate, then, for the exchange to take place in such a location.

As if to underline the idea that Cole is beginning to grasp his social obligation, the following sequence has him explicitly performing the traditional vocational role. For the first time, he stops running from a desperate ghost and asks it, "Do you want to tell me something?" The film is not so much about clearing up any particular local or domestic trauma, laying any particular unsettled soul to rest, but rather about establishing the need for *commitment* to obligation.

Yet it is not enough to say that Cole, as a vocational figure, simply develops enough maturity to shoulder his social responsibility, an obligation that implicitly belongs to the audience as well. Cole's development takes place through interaction *with* the ghostly past. The relationship is complex: the father, Malcolm, teaches the son, helping him to understand his vocation; the son teaches the father to accept his fate, and thus to embrace social and historical limits. This last insight is quite traditional for ghost narratives. It is a form of exorcism, the insistence of the living that history cannot, and must not, dominate and overpower the present. Malcolm and Cole's evolving relationship (father/son, teacher/student, confessor/penitent) models the sane social organism's dialogue with history.

Shyamalan's work has been incredibly popular, attracting widespread media attention, and even eliciting fairly nuanced academic treatment.⁶ And at least three of his major Hollywood pictures—*The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable* (2000), and *Signs* (2002)—are about accepting vocational responsibility, each more explicit than the last. Indeed, the hero of *Signs* is a faith-challenged minister who ends the film with a deliberate and conscious reshouldering of his obligation. I think that the commercial appeal of these films is grounded in their familiar themes and motifs. Behind the pleasures of surprise endings and thriller effects, word-of-mouth enthusiasm and multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns, *The Sixth Sense*, in particular, was successful at least partially because audiences identified with the folkloric traditions it treats so seriously.

But while Shyamalan's vision is undeniably appealing, and powerfully effective when read from a folkloric perspective, it remains politically and ethically problematic. *The Sixth Sense* may gesture toward the necessity of communal obligation as a corrective to ahistorical solipsism, yet its focus on a preadolescent vocational hero conveniently encourages viewers to avoid the larger questions implied by its neat resolution. What would a *mature* vocational attitude look like? How precisely would a sympathetic viewer make practical use of the ethical imperative that animates the film? How, in short, can the obligatory logic manifested by this vocational figure be translated into effective political praxis? Philip Strick's *Sight & Sound* review is the most insightful on this point because it grasps both the intensity and the disturbing implications of the ideas Shyamalan has set in motion: "But what kind of future awaits him in the employment of his now validated gift is left to the imagination" (1999, 54).

Shyamalan's film, like the features he has directed since, is unable or unwilling to answer these questions. It may be that the filmmaker

simply lacks the sophistication to think through the implications of his vocational theme. But it may also be that the impasse reached by his films neatly articulates an anxiety characteristic of the current political state. Perhaps, he seems to suggest, a considered reappraisal of the vocational figure can point the way toward a politics grounded in relation to the Other. On the other hand, the overdetermined self-consciousness of his narrative conceits may mask a more disturbing possibility: that Other-centered ethics is literally impossible, that rational sociality is an unattainable phantom.

This possibility is suggested by *The Sixth Sense's* dark twin, Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001). The tone of this film is far cooler, even starkly minimalist (for a major studio project), allowing it to capture the bleakness that follows from the vocational opportunity lost, the ghostly crisis made irresolvable. The film refuses Shyamalan's triumph, instead privileging a narrative of vocational absence, which implies a world overwhelmed by absolute political despair.

The Others, significantly focused on wartime experiences on the home front and the battlefield, is a novel variation on the Gothic tradition of the threatened domestic space. Nicole Kidman plays Grace Stewart, an isolated and desperate wife and mother during World War II, literally trapped with her two children inside an imposing, mausoleum-like house overrun with seemingly malignant spirits. For much of the film, Grace deals with both ghostly and earthly threats through denial, rote Catholic piety, and an ever-more obsessive insistence on domestic routine. These conventional avenues of socialized behavior are derived from the home-front tradition exemplified by such popular World War II films as *Mrs. Miniver* (William Wyler, 1942) and *Since You Went Away* (John Cromwell, 1944). But the anxieties that fueled these women's domestic routines are here accentuated to the point of hysteria. And Grace benefits from none of the social networks, neighbors, relief work, and community ritual that cushion Mrs. Miniver's fearful isolation.

In search of precisely that longed-for, but strangely absent, social interaction, Grace eventually gets up the courage to leave the house and seek help from the traditional source: the local parish priest. This gesture, precisely the one that resolves individual trauma and underlines the effectiveness of social institutions in traditional ghost narratives, turns out to be absolutely futile. Grace's aborted appeal to the traditional vocational figure (whom she never reaches) leaves her quite literally lost in a gray, featureless fog, out of which materializes the accusatory specter of Charles Stewart (Christopher Eccleston), her dead soldier/husband. This gaunt, almost-wordless figure recalls the ghostly soldiers in 1940s

films like *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946) and *A Guy Named Joe* (1943), but he is bereft of their vivacity and effectiveness. Again, the hopeful spirit of 1940s-era war melodramas is drained away, leaving only longing and regret. Amenábar consistently refuses to give his subjects' narrative authority, foregrounding the frustration of desire at every turn.

The ghostly husband's arrival precipitates the final existential crisis in the film. Eventually we learn that Grace *herself* is a ghost, one who not only took her own life but the lives of her children as well. Pathological isolation is revealed to be absolute, and the maternal domesticity celebrated in an earlier generation's home-front films appears like an illusion. Grace's realization of her guilt is essentially empty because, as she learns from other denizens of the spectral world, she is beyond help from either earthly or spiritual sources. The film leaves the heroine and her family trapped in an eternal loop of domestic suffering and historical trauma.

The Others allegorically imagines a social order unwilling or unable to face its own past, ensuring that the domestic (national, political) landscape will be inhospitable to the living. After all, we learn in the final moments of the film that the household ghosts have ousted the next generation of (living) tenants, reserving this site of collective trauma for their own narratives of abjection. And by the end of the film, Grace has renounced that traditional ghostly appeal to be heard and remembered. *The Others*, remarkably for a commercial film, rejects this possibility. The audience experiences the failure of the spectral encounter from the *inside*, is made to grasp viscerally the possibility that the obligatory ethic is both absolutely essential and tragically unavailable.

Is it possible to live with this bleak possibility: that the committed relation of self to Other can be no more than fanciful abstraction, that history can be grasped only as a mindless violence that inevitably severs us from any meaningful communion with those who share our experience of cinema or the social world outside the theater? Shyamalan and Amenábar offer competing answers to these questions, and also to a more explicitly political one that animates many recent critiques of the "business as usual" of contemporary society: must individuals and local communities accept a passive, powerless role in the developing global economy? *The Sixth Sense* is perhaps overly optimistic on this point and flirts with sentimental dishonesty in its drive to please audiences. But Grace's despairing stasis at the end of *The Others* is more disturbing, echoing an image from Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott's 2004 documentary *The Corporation*. A pallid consumer is bathed in the baleful glow of his television, isolated from human contact, mute and unthinking.

The camera circles this virtually spectral figure, revealing the barcode stamped on the back of his neck. The filmmakers suggest that the ahistorical, disengaged passivity of the corporate consumer is not merely a side effect of mediated modernity but the logical endpoint of a society that has lost touch with the idea of social and historical obligation.⁷ Without that obligatory relationship allegorized by the spectral encounter, and articulated in social terms through the vocational figure, we can look forward only to a sort of death-in-life, powerless to speak out for justice—to the other, to the earth, and to the memory of those who have gone before us.

Notes

1. Andrew Britton (1985) anticipates Nadel's "Reaganite entertainment" argument. Contemporary reviews of many of these films had already registered unease with their political implications. For representative examples, see Auty (1982), Chanko (1982), Kellner (1983), Sterrit (1989) and (1990), Brown (1990), Gretton (1990), Kelleher (1990), Rainer (1990), and Newman (1991).
2. For discussions of *Don't Look Now*, primarily from a psychoanalytic perspective, see Palmer and Riley (1995), Wilson (1999), and von der Lippe (1999). Only the Palmer/Riley piece, in its concern with the experience of belief, approximates the vocational focus of the present discussion.
3. For discussions of the disturbing implications of Oda Mae's erasure, see Rothenberg (1997) and Modleski (1991, 134).
4. Unsurprisingly, most reviews of *Stir of Echoes* remark on its unfortunate similarity to *The Sixth Sense*, but also its striking depiction of Chicago-area working-class life. Only Atkinson singles out the remarkable final image: "Bacon's spirit-conversant preschool son...sits tiny and implacable before a rising soundtrack storm of needy whispers" (1999, 146).
5. For discussion of the reactionary politics of *Field of Dreams*, see Nadel (1997, 50–53), Holden (1989), and Gretton (1990, 73–74).
6. The weightiest academic treatment of the film so far is La Caze (2002). Meanwhile, mainstream media has consistently treated its director with respect. For example, see Giles (2002).
7. For a discussion of the ethical thrust of *The Corporation's* argument, see the interview with filmmaker Jennifer Abbott in West and West (2004).

Filmography

Beetlejuice (1988). 92 min. Tim Burton

The Changeling (1980). 115 min. Peter Medak

The Corporation (2003). 145 min. Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott

Don't Look Now (1973). 110 min Nicolas Roeg

Field of Dreams (1989). 107 min. Phil Alden Robinson

Ghost (1990). 128 min. Jerry Zucker
Ghostbusters (1984). 107 min. Ivan Reitman
Ghost Story (1981). 110 min. John Irvin
A Guy Named Joe (1943). 122 min. Victor Fleming
Lady in White (1988). 112 min. Frank LaLoggia
A Matter of Life and Death (Stairway to Heaven) (1946). 104 min. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger
Mrs. Miniver (1942). 134 min. William Wyler
The Others (2001). 101 min. Alejandro Amenábar
Poltergeist (1982). 114 min. Tobe Hooper
Rope (1948). 80 min. Alfred Hitchcock
Signs (2002). 106 min. M. Night Shyamalan
Since You Went Away (1944). 172 min. John Cromwell
The Sixth Sense (1999). 107 min. M. Night Shyamalan
Stir of Echoes (1999). 99 min. David Koepp
Unbreakable (2000). 106 min. M. Night Shyamalan

Works Cited

- Atkinson, Michael. 1999. *Stir of echoes*. *Village Voice*, September 14, 146.
- Auty, Chris. 1982. *Poltergeist*. *Monthly Film Bulletin* 49: 205–6.
- Bennett, Gillian. 1999. *Alas, poor ghost! Traditions of belief in story and discourse*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Bradley, Linda. 1995. *Film horror and the body fantastic*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Britton, Andrew. 1985. Blissing out: The politics of Reaganite entertainment. *Movie* 31–32: 2–21.
- Brown, Georgia. 1990. *Village Voice*, November 6, 69.
- Chanko, Kenneth M. 1982. *Poltergeist*. *Films in Review* 33: 430–31.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1994. *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge.
- DiPiero, Thomas. 1997. Angels in the (out) field of vision. *Camera Obscura* 40–41:201–25.
- duMaurier, Daphne. 1971. *Don't look now*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.
- Finucane, R. C. 1996. *Ghosts: Appearances of the dead and cultural transformation*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Fowkes, Katherine. 1998. *Giving up the ghost: Spirits, ghosts and angels in mainstream comedy films*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1995. The uncanny. In *Psychological writings and letters*, ed. Sander L. Gilman, 120–53. New York: Continuum Press.
- Giles, Jeff. 2002. Out of this world. *Newsweek*, August 5, 48.
- Gretton, Viveca. 1990. You could look it up: Notes towards a reading of baseball, history, and ideology in the dominant cinema. *CineAction* 21–22: 73–74.
- Holden, Steven. 1989. Today's hits yearn for old times. *New York Times*, Arts and Leisure Section, August 13, 25.
- Jackson, Shirley. 1959. *The haunting of Hill House*. New York: Viking Press.
- James, Henry. 1898. *The turn of the screw*. London: William Heinemann.

- Kelleher, Terry. 1990. *Ghost*. *Newsday*, July 13, sec. 2, 13.
- Kellner, Douglas. 1983. *Poltergeist*: Suburban identity. *Jump Cut* 28: 5–7.
- La Caze, Marguerite. 2002. The mourning of loss in *The sixth sense*. *Post Script* 21 (3): 111–21.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1982. *Ethics and infinity*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Modleski, Tania. 1991. *Feminism without women: Culture and criticism in a postfeminist age*. New York: Routledge.
- Nadel, Alan. 1997. *Flatlining on the field of dreams: Cultural narratives in the films of President Reagan's America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Newman, Kim. 1991. *Jacob's Ladder*. *Sight & Sound* 105: 49.
- Palmer, James, and Michael Riley. 1995. Seeing, believing and knowing in narrative film: *Don't look now* revisited. *Literature/Film Quarterly* 23 (1): 14–25.
- Rainer, Peter. 1990. Casualties of gore. *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, C-1.
- Rothenberg, Molly Anne. 1997. The “newer angels” and the living dead: The ethics of screening obsessional desire. *Camera Obscura* 40–41: 17–41.
- Shakespeare, William. 1974. *The tragedy of Hamlet, prince of Denmark*. In *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 1135–97. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sterritt, David. 1989. Fantasy baseball yarn flounders on sheer niceness. *Christian Science Monitor*, May 2, 11.
- . 1990. *Ghost* provides a second rate showcase for a first rate talent. *Christian Science Monitor*, August 22, 11.
- Strick, Philip. 1999. *The sixth sense*. *Sight & Sound* 8: 54.
- Tangherlini, Timothy. 1998. ‘Who ya gonna call?’: Ministers and the mediation of ghostly threat in Danish legend tradition. *Western Folklore* 57: 153–78.
- von der Lippe, George B. 1999. *Death in Venice* in literature and film: Six 20th century versions. *Mosaic* 32 (1): 35–54.
- West, Dennis, and Joan M. West. 2004. The life and times of *The corporation*. *Cineaste* 30 (1): 28–33.
- Wilson, Kristi. 1999. Time, space and vision: Nicolas Roeg's *Don't look now*. *Screen* 40 (3): 277–94.