# Coming Full Circle: M. Night Shyamalan's 'Split' Career



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Watching the new trailer for M. Night Shyamalan's upcoming film *Split* (trailer below), I've never hoped more that a film was a metaphor for a director's career. Could it be that after a split-personality career of both great and terrible horror films, M. Night Shyamalan has found a new path back to good movies?

While he kick-started his career with a scary film, *The Sixth Sense*, it wouldn't be accurate to call Shyamalan simply a horror film director. *Split* feels like a psychological thriller with horror elements, just like *Signs* was a sci-fi film with horror elements. If there's anything we can rely on in regard to Shyamalan, it's that he'll never give us all the details up front. He's built a career on twists, reversals, and fake-outs. Unfortunately, they've only worked half the time.

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## The Heyday: 'The Sixth Sense,' 'Unbreakable,' And 'Signs'

*The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, *Signs* and (for some) *The Village* were arguably the height (so far) of Shyamalan's career. Yes, I know, *The Village* is a divisive film among fans, but this devotee loved it and it did slightly better with audiences than with critics. But it was the featured devices of his breakout film, *The Sixth Sense*, that would come to define Shyamalan.



Adult-child relationships, especially of a parental or parental replacement nature, jarring reveals of gruesome or shocking elements, and of course, a twist that changes the entire vantage point of the film, almost demanding the viewer watch the film a second time. It was fun and exciting and I recall an entire summer of friends taunting friends with their knowledge of *The Sixth Sense's* huge twist. It's amazing to meet anyone now who doesn't know it, whether they've seen the film or not.

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Shyamalan was truly contributing originality to the thriller/horror genre, for one by simply crossing genres and avoiding tropes. Not that he didn't have his fair share of jump scares, but they were expertly timed and integrated seamlessly with plot development. But, more than anything, he added sincere emotion — which, as it turned out, was what made his films even scarier. Through a little boy who wants to stop seeing scary images, a man trying to figure out who he is to himself and his family, or a sad widower reconnecting with the family that still needs him, Shyamalan's early characters gripped our hearts, leaving us vulnerable and more afraid for what might happen to them. His first few films felt distinctive and his name was synonymous with the promise of an exciting fear.

## The Slump: 'The Village,' 'Lady In The Water,' And 'The Happening'

I will admit, *The Village* was the beginning of Shyamalan's decline. It's not necessarily that a new personality of his emerged to suddenly create subpar movies, in fact, it was more like he leaned too far into what had been working for him. He got too comfortable and took his audience for granted. Personally, I think the emotional core of *The Village* is quite strong. The characters are fleshed out and interesting and their relationships are what ultimately save the movie for me. But the thrills aren't thrilling and the final reveal wasn't just predictable, it was cheap.



*Lady in the Water* saw Shyamalan treading even further into his softer instincts, the ones that made him initially so strong in writing characters and emotionally connecting the audience to the film. But it backfired. There were twice as many characters as his previous films, the plot was flimsy, the melodrama overshadowed actual drama and nothing felt particularly scary. And maybe he didn't want to make another scary movie, maybe he was going for a film with heart and story. Whatever *Lady in the Water's* goals, it didn't seem to accomplish any of them.
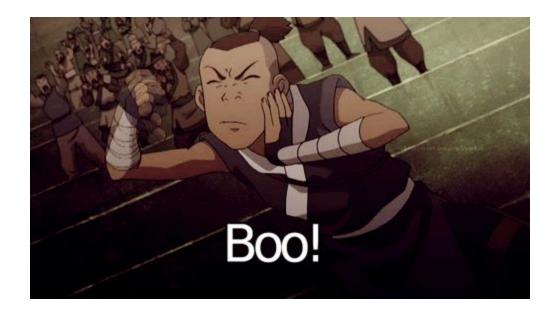
Shyamalan leaned too much on his softer instincts, and it backfired.

*The Happening* felt like Shyamalan was admitting he should get back to thrillers only to very publicly admit he had forgotten how to make them. Mark Wahlberg as a science teacher on the run against, um, well, plants, plants who don't seem to play by any rules as far as murderous villains go. It was a disaster.



## The Blockbuster Period: 'The Last Airbender' And 'After Earth'

In 2010 Shyamalan directed *The Last Airbender*, taking a shot at a large-budget franchise film. While I don't completely blame the film's failure on Shyamalan — he was working with a hugely particular fan base, a tricky endeavor for sure — he did write the film, deviating far too much from the beloved source material. And he certainly had a say in the casting, much of which was poorly handled and jarringly whitewashed.
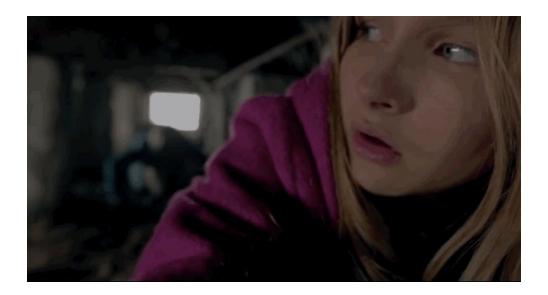
Shyamalan seemed to have lost touch with his greatest strength: story.

2013's *After Earth* seemed distinctly "studio" in its large scale elements but also flopped with viewers, getting only an 11% on Rotten Tomatoes. Once again Shyamalan tried to grip audiences emotionally, featuring a father and son in the film (and a real life duo at that), but Shyamalan continued to prove he had lost touch with that most essential of film elements: story. When Shyamalan produced and directed the pilot for Fox summertime show *Wayward Pines* in 2015 it felt like he was starting to endorse smart psychological thrillers again, but critics and audiences couldn't fully agree on whether they ultimately liked the show. Fox decided to take a shot on Season 2, but after recently wrapping up, general consensus found it lacking.

## The Revival?: 'The Visit' And 'Split'

And then came last year's *The Visit*. Many groaned at the thought of Shyamalan attempting a found footage film; could it be another cheap attempt at reviving his horror career? Amazingly, the film was good. Really good. It's scary, funny, and certainly doesn't feel like any other found footage film. There are children, of course, but no overly complicated emotional core. In fact, in its humor, Shyamalan seemed to poke fun at blind familial connectivity for relationship's sake, using it to fuel the film's small but satisfying twist. Family ties are certainly a theme of the film, but it's as if Shyamalan remembered that it doesn't need to always manifest the same way.



After *The Visit*, a small bit of that original adoration I had for Shyamalan returned and it's enough to make me want to see *Split* (plus James McAvoy as a 9-year-old kid named Hedwig? Yes!).



James McAvoy is an evil 9-year-old.

But let's hope whatever twist is most certainly in store for us in this new film reveals a more mature Shyamalan. A version of him who has hopefully learned the lessons of his early career and stops trying so hard to blow our minds. On top of the hardship of having massive success too early on, it's hard to imagine anyone in these modern times getting away with building a career in Hollywood based on the same old trick.

Shyamalan's dexterity skyrocketed him, but his adaptability, should he truly have it, will keep him afloat. *Split* is about a man with 23 personalities. Has Shyamalan discovered the diversity of his own inner voices? I, for one, can't wait to hear what else he has to say.

**Do you feel like M. Night Shyamalan has entered a new age of better films or should we stay wary?**
(Original Movie Pilot URL)