

Film review: *The Sixth Sense*

This 1999 film is difficult to critique or praise without betraying crucial elements of its plot that would quickly spoil any suspense for most viewers. Nevertheless, it is a suspenseful and interesting film, with superb acting and some truly poignant and memorable scenes. Its subject matter is not for the *faint-of-heart*, however.

A highly successful Child Psychologist named *Dr. Malcolm Crowe* (Bruce Willis) was recently recognized by the City of Philadelphia for his exemplary work with disturbed children. After he and his loving wife have basked in the glow of his award, and are about to retire for the night, they are alarmed to discover that someone has broken into their home. The intruder soon reveals himself, and explains that he was a former patient of *Dr. Crowe's* -- to whom he angrily and sarcastically refers as "*this hero*" -- whose own condition *Dr. Crowe* severely misdiagnosed years before. The highly agitated and clearly disturbed individual then shoots Crowe before blowing out his own brains.



To atone for such a personal and professional tragedy, *Dr. Crowe* focuses his skills on another of his clients, a young boy named *Cole Sear* (Haley Joel Osment) that *Dr. Crowe* believes he can help, but who has a history and diagnosis very similar to the psychotic intruder. After a long time spent establishing sufficient trust, *Cole* reluctantly confides to *Dr. Crowe* that **"I see dead people."** In response to *Dr. Crowe's* questions, he explains that they aren't in their graves, but rather **"...walking around like regular people...They don't see each other...They only see what they want to see...They don't know they're dead."**



"I see dead people"

Most of *Cole's* problems stem from the fact that these ghosts routinely visit him, and many scratch him and pester him because they want him to do things for them. Somehow, *Cole* is familiar with the Latin phrase, **"de profundus clamo ad Te, Domine,"** which translated means **"from the depths, we cry out to Thee, Oh Lord."** This suggests an explanation for the behaviors of the ghosts who terrorize *Cole*.

Dr. Malcomb Crowe's crusade to save *Cole Sear* from a fate similar to that of the psychotic who invaded his home requires that he devote a great

deal of his time to the task. As time passes, *Crowe* increasingly realizes that he and his wife have become estranged and barely speak to one another any longer. When he mentions this to *Cole* in an unguarded moment, the boy tries to be helpful and in an odd role-reversal, suggests that *Crowe* try speaking to his wife while she is asleep. *Cole* then assures him that she will hear him. *Cole's* advice makes for one of the most moving scenes in the film, a scene that is actually heart-rending.



Another beautiful and moving scene is one in which *Cole* belatedly reveals his dark secret to his loving but deeply concerned mother, *Lynn Sear* (Toni Collette.) He finally divulges to her that he can see ghosts, and that *grandma*, Lynn's mother, visits him sometimes. In fact, *grandma* has asked *Cole* to say hello to *Lynn*. Despite *Lynn's* initial skepticism and her alarm that *Cole* may truly be delusional after all, *Cole* soon convinces her by revealing secrets that the deceased grandmother told him, but which only grandma and *Lynn* could possibly know. The tearful and loving embrace that follows between mother and son is a much-needed catharsis at this point in the film.



"Grandma says hi"

If the film has a weakness, it's the rather long delay it takes for trust to be established between *Crowe* and *Cole*, no doubt mimicking the time normally needed to establish trust between any Child Psychologist and patient. Still, that part of the film seems to drag. In addition, one must embrace the principle espoused by the late John Simon, former **NEW YORK** magazine and **NATIONAL REVIEW** film critic, that fiction often requires *"the suspension of disbelief."* It would be easy for viewers to poke holes in this film for certain lapses of consistency, but what purpose would it serve? The film is intended to be suspenseful and entertaining, not historically accurate, nor an attempt to apply logic to metaphysics.

The strength of the film is in its acting. Eleven year-old Haley Joel Osment may well have turned in the most remarkable and eminently believable performance ever given by an actor under the age of 16, and did so in a very difficult and demanding role. He was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor, but for some reason didn't win. (You'll have to ask the dilettantes in Hollywood...)

After starring in mostly "tough guy" roles during his career, Bruce Willis turned in a sensitive and nuanced performance that earned him an **Academy Award** nomination for Best Actor. Toni Collette turned in an equally excellent and believable performance as *Cole's* mother, Lynn, and received an **Academy Award** nomination for *Best Supporting Actress*. *Malcolm Crowe's* wife *Anna* (Olivia Williams) had a small role, but her beauty illuminated the screen to such an extent that it was difficult to take one's eyes off her.

Much credit must also go to M. Knight Shyamalan, the film's Director and its screenwriter. The film was nominated for six **Academy Awards**, including *Best Picture*, *Best Original Screenplay*, and *Best Director*, each attributable to the efforts of Shyamalan. This film follows the commercial and artistic success of his earlier film, **Signs**, starring Mel Gibson. (*This time the invaders are ghosts instead of hostile space aliens.*) His trademark surprise endings and his cameo performances in his own films are clearly an *homage* to Alfred Hitchcock. And, like Hitchcock, he doesn't shy away from scary subjects that can make us extremely uncomfortable.

If we are visited by ghosts who walk amongst us for some purpose, one message this film clearly intends to convey is that science and its derivative professions are wholly inadequate to understand or cope with such a phenomenon. Indeed, it was Shakespeare who best addressed this "Dualistic" concept when Hamlet declared after being visited by his father's ghost, "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

-- by Earl P. Holt III