



Universidad de Valladolid

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras

Grado en Estudios Ingleses

**From Post-Horror to Deep Horror: M. Night
Shyamalan's Take on the Genre**

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Curso: 2022-2023

Abstract

This essay approaches the characterization of “post-horror”, a film sub-genre established by Steve Rose. According to Rose, the term itself derives from the adjective ‘postmodern’ to refer to a set of horror movies produced in the 2010s and characterized by grief, complicated family bonds and existential dread. After considering the characterization proposed by Rose, the function of these elements in post-horror films is explored and compared to the presence of similar elements in M. N. Shyamalan’s movies in the 1990s. It is found that both sets of films follow the same strategies: grief and complicated family bonds are used to deepen into the characters; the portrayal of existential dread triggers a characteristic kind of discomfort; and ambiguous scenes stimulate open-ended interpretation processes. The results of this comparison mark the emergence of post-horror, here rebaptized as deep horror, long before 2010.

Key Words: Post-Horror, Characterization, Shyamalan, Grief, Existential Dread, Ambiguity.

Resumen

Este ensayo aborda la caracterización del “post-horror”, un sub-género cinematográfico establecido por Steve Rose. Según Rose, este término deriva del adjetivo ‘posmoderno’ para referirse a un conjunto de películas de terror producidas en 2010 y caracterizadas por duelo emocional, vínculos familiares complicados y terror existencial. Tras considerar la caracterización propuesta por Rose, la función de estos elementos en las películas de post-horror es explorada y comparada con la presencia de elementos similares en los filmes de M. N. Shyamalan pertenecientes a la década de 1990. Se encuentra que ambos sets de películas siguen las mismas estrategias: el duelo emocional y los vínculos familiares complicados se usan para profundizar en los personajes; la representación del terror existencial produce un característico tipo de incomodidad; y las escenas ambiguas estimulan procesos de interpretación. Los resultados de esta comparación marcan el nacimiento del post-horror, aquí rebautizado como terror profundo, mucho antes del 2010.

Palabras Clave: Post-Horror, Caracterización, Shyamalan, Duelo, Terror Existencial, Ambigüedad.

Index:

1. Introduction.....	7
2. Post-Horror: Problems.....	8
3. Grief and Complicated Family Bonds.....	10
3.1. <u>Grief</u>	10
3.2. <u>Complicated Family Bonds</u>	16
4. Existential Dread.....	20
5. Jump-scares and Ambiguity.....	25
5.1. <u>Departing from Shock Value</u>	25
5.2. <u>Ambiguous Scenes</u>	26
6. A New Name.....	27
7. Conclusion.....	29
8. Bibliography.....	31

1. Introduction

Often either loved or avoided by the spectator, the horror genre is as controversial as it is old in the film industry, as it has been among us for more than 120 years, with the release of Méliès's *The House of the Devil* (1896). This genre has always aimed to evoke cultural and primitive fears in the audience in order to “frighten and revolt [them]” (Kawin, 2012). That is why, throughout history, filmmakers have explored different ways to achieve such reactions. Some movies have been a turning point in the horror cinema, as they have transcended in time due to their great impact on the genre when they were released. Such is the case of films in the Anglo-American market like *Dracula* (Browning, 1931), whose success “gave rise to the era at the Universal Monsters” (Phillips, 2005); *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), which portrays the possession of a teenager by a demonic entity; *Alien* (Scott, 1979), in which the crew of a spaceship is stalked by an extraterrestrial creature; *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), which illustrates the attempts of a man to kill the members of his family after being affected by supernatural forces that dwelled a haunted house; or Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), a psychological film in which “[the subconscious is] a narrative force that operates within a form of brutal realism” (Cámara-Arenas, 83). Decade after decade, the necessity for innovating and searching for other methods to satisfy the audience has made the horror genre become richer and more flexible.

Such flexibility has been caused by the emergence of several variants, as known as sub-genres, that share similar patterns within the horror genre. In the 2010 decade, a set of seemingly innovative horror films with similar elements emerged, which could mean the birth of a new sub-genre. The excitement for discovering something new, or even the desire for recognition, made some authors rush to proclaim that they had discovered a new sub-genre, without looking back to verify if similar works had been made before. That was the case of Steve Rose, a British author that wasted no time in encompassing the main characteristics of this set of movies under the “post-horror” label. Since then, such term has gained a great popularity within the film sector, in which it has been naturally accepted by some film festivals, such as the Barbican's *Post-Horror Summer Nights* (2022).

However, given Rose's ambiguous definition of post-horror, some researchers have explored the origin of the sub-genre and provided their own take on the matter. Church considers post-horror to be "a cycle within a longer tradition of art-horror", that combines "art cinema as a formally distinctive mode of film practice and the *horror genre* as an established set of storytelling conventions, iconography and themes" (8). Bridges also offers his own version of post-horror, whose elements would symbolize current social and political concerns, such as the role of the Tea Party Movement in Trump's electoral victory (37). Thus, according to him, post-horror movies would function as allegories of the middle-class fears such as misogyny, racism or uncertainty towards the future (45).

Neither Rose nor the other post-horror theorists have considered Shyamalan's works, which resemble the so-called post-horror movies and could harbor the roots of this sub-genre. Thus, in this paper, the relationship between the origin of post-horror and M. Night Shyamalan's works *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Signs* (2002) and *The Village* (2004) will be discussed, which puts at risk the alleged factor of novelty of the sub-genre. For this, the elements proposed by Rose for the characterization of post-horror will be approached and compared to the ones that appear in the mentioned works of Shyamalan. Lastly, this work will culminate with a new term that better describes the basis of the sub-genre.

2. Post Horror: Problems

In 2017, a British author named Steve Rose wrote a review for *The Guardian* about the American movie *It Comes at Night* to justify the emergence of a new horror sub-genre, whose name was already visible within the review's title: *How post-horror movies are taking over cinema*. Rose is a writer and editor specialized in the areas of film, television, architecture, art and culture. He counts with more than 20 years of experience in the sector. In his article, Rose points out that we are witnessing the birth of a new variant within the genre, which does not play by the rules already established by the conventional horror movies. According to him, this sub-genre emerged alongside the following movies: *It Comes*

at Night (Shults, 2017), *The Witch* (Eggers, 2015), *A Ghost Story* (Lowery, 2017), *Personal Shopper* (Assayas, 2016), *The Neon Demon* (Refn, 2016) and *Get Out* (Peele, 2017). In order to characterize this new sub-genre, Rose enumerates the elements shared by the mentioned movies: grief, guilt, regret and paranoia; complicated family bonds; and the replacement of jump-scares by existential dread. After that, Rose comments on the marketing of post-horror movies, pointing out that their title and trailers suggest a conventional horror movie with the purpose of drawing more people, hiding the fact that they do not follow an orthodox formula. According to Rose, that is the reason why these movies are later criticized on social media by what he calls “mainstream moviegoers”, which are the part of the audience who prefer to watch movies that always follow the same pattern. Upon the criticism received towards his first article, five years later Rose decided to write a second one, whose title shows that his definition and denomination of post-horror meant a problem that until today remains unsolved: *I called it ‘post-horror’ ...and now I’ve created a monster* (2022). In his second article, Rose provides an explanation for the origin of the term “post-horror”: it comes from its similarity with “postmodern” since “postmodern architecture played with established language and traditions without necessarily sticking to the rules” (1). After that, he expands his corpus of post-horror movies with *It Follows* (Mitchell, 2014), *The Babadook* (Kent, 2014), *Raw* (Ducournau, 2016), *Split* (Shyamalan, 2016), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Amirpour, 2014), *Under the Shadow* (Anvari, 2016), *Green Room* (Saulnier, 2016) and *A Quiet Place* (Krasinski, 2018) to confirm that the 2010 decade was the one that marked the emergence of post-horror: “Whatever your feelings about the label post-horror, we can surely agree something extraordinary was happening in cinema in the mid-2010s” (14).

Whereas I agree that the mentioned movies form a unique sub-genre, I think that Rose’s characterization of post-horror is vague, unclear, excessively general, and hence, unsatisfying as a foundation for the definition of a sub-genre due to the following reasons: (1.) He makes no attempt to provide an explanation for the presence of emotional responses such as grief, guilt or regret, nor for the complicated family bonds, whose mere inclusion does not set post-horror apart from conventional horror movies; (2.) he generalizes conventional horror movies, to which he explicitly refers to as “movies with jump-scares”

and fails to acknowledge the shock value in the films he proposed as post-horror, as he considers jump-scares to be replaced by existential dread; and (3.) he does not take into account Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*, *Signs* or *The Village*, which share the same characteristics of post-horror movies.

All these problems make me consider a deeper and more detailed characterization of post-horror to be necessary in which I will: (1.) Clarify and expand the concepts established by Rose; (2.) demonstrate that this sub-genre did not emerge in 2010, as Shyamalan was making this type of movies at the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century; and (3.) offer a new name to the term that better fits its characterization. Before moving onto the next point, I will introduce M. Night Shyamalan, since this research revolves, to a great extent, around his work. Shyamalan is an Indian American filmmaker, producer and actor. Although his filming career started years earlier, Shyamalan put himself on the map after the release of *The Sixth Sense* (1999), making 673 million dollars at the box-office, which earned him Academy nominations for *Best Picture*, *Best Director* and *Best Original Screenplay*, among others. After that, he kept thriving, making more than 900 million dollars at the box-office with his movies *Unbreakable* (2000), *Signs* (2002) and *The Village* (2004).

3. Grief and complicated family bonds

In this section, the function of grief and complicated family bonds in post-horror and Shyamalan's movies will be explored. To carry this out, a comparison between the post-horror movies *The Babadook* and *Personal Shopper* with Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* and *The Village* will be conducted.

3.1. Grief

As mentioned in the first section of this paper, Rose states that in post-horror films "there is grief, guilt, regret, paranoia" (2017, 6). There seems to be consensus on the

appearance of these elements among the researchers. Bridges, in his exploration of post-horror, points that post-horror movies “reflect on the meaning of the tragic death of a family member” (6). Church states that “Indeed, one of the major characteristics of post-horror is a thematic exploration of what Silvan Tomkins terms ‘negative effects’ (including grief, sadness, shame, anger)” (13) and points out the lack of novelty of the inclusion of these elements and their importance in the narrative: “Of course, this is not to say that more mainstream horror films have not used similar themes in less ‘rarified’ forms, but rather post-horror films tend to ascribe more narrative weight to such concerns” (13). Both Bridges and Church go beyond the inclusion of these emotional responses and acknowledge their importance in post-horror films. In my estimation, the inclusion of grief and other emotional responses is not what makes post-horror different from conventional horror movies, but their function in the narrative, as they are used as a technique to acquire a better understanding on each character’s feelings. For example, grief is portrayed in *Personal Shopper* through the character of Maureen Cartwright (Kristen Stewart), who works as a personal shopper in Paris, where her brother, Lewis, recently died. Far from showing signs of depression or acceptance, Maureen tries to mitigate her suffering with the possibility of communicating with the ghost of her late brother, which leads her to do all kinds of spiritual rituals. In fact, she remains hopeful she will contact him even after her failed attempts, which is shown when she is talking on a video call with her boyfriend, Gary (Ty Olwin):

[1] GARY. What the hell do you do in Paris?

[2] MAUREEN. You know. I’m waiting. I have to wait.

[3] GARY. It’s been three months,

[4] MAUREEN. I think I felt something. I need to go back to Lewis’ house, I really think I felt something.

[5] GARY. You think you felt something or you’re sure?

[6] MAUREEN. I just need to see it to the end. That’s all (00:18:27-00:18:50).

[6] Shows Maureen’s avoidance to answer Gary’s question, which portrays the uncertainty and confusion that the character is going through. It is not clear whether she managed to establish contact with her brother, but it is certain that she will attribute this

possibility to every odd situation that she experiences, since she still remains stuck in the past. This becomes evident when she starts receiving text messages from an unknown number which are disturbing, as the person behind that number seems to know too much about her life (00:38:43). Maureen, far from thinking that it may be all about someone pranking her, or even a person who is looking to hurt her, she tries to figure out if the number belongs to her brother:

- [7] UNKNOWN. I know you.
- [8] UNKNOWN. And you know me.
- [9] UNKNOWN. You're off to London.
- [10] MAUREEN. Who is this?
- [11] UNKNOWN. Have a guess.
- [12] MAUREEN. No answer to my question.
- [13] MAUREEN. Are you a man or a woman?
- [14] UNKNOWN. What difference does it make?
- [15] MAUREEN. Are you real?
- [16] MAUREEN. Are you alive or dead?
- [17] MAUREEN. Alive or dead?
- [18] MAUREEN. Lewis? (00:40:06-00:41:53).

The person behind the unknown number did not end up being her brother, but Maureen could not think about anyone else. [16], [17] and mainly [18], portray Maureen's despondency to make any contact with Lewis. Maureen's symptoms seem to fit the description of the third stage of grief, bargaining, provided by Kübler-Ross and Kessler in *On Grief and Grieving* (17):

After a loss, bargaining may take the form of a temporary truce. (...) We become lost in a maze of 'If only' or 'What if' statements. We want life returned to what it was; we want our loved one restored. (...) We remain in the past, trying to negotiate our way out of the hurt (Kübler-Ross and Kessler, 17).

Thus, through Maureen's grief, in which she is trying to mitigate her suffering, we can observe uncertainty, confusion and despair in her to the possibility of contacting her late

brother. These emotional responses functionally deepen into Maureen's character. Similarly, in Shyamalan's *The Village*, grief is also used to have a better understanding of the characters' emotions. The film focuses on the life of the inhabitants of a village from which they cannot get out, as the place is surrounded by a forest that is known to harbor monsters, to which the inhabitants refer as "Those We Don't Speak Of". The village is governed by the Elders, who are the settlers and founders of it. Just like in *Personal Shopper*, the movie opens with a character affected by the loss of a loved one. In this case it is August Nicholson (Brendan Gleeson), who is in the cemetery mourning the loss of his 7-year-old son, who passed away from illness:

[19] AUGUST. Who'll pinch me to wake me up? Who will laugh at me when I fall? Whose breath will I listen for, so that I may sleep? Whose hand will I hold, so that I may walk? (00:02:40).

This piece of speech shows the deep feeling of sorrow that August is going through, which fits in the description of the stage 4 of grief, depression, provided by Kubler-Ross and Kessler: "Empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters our lives on a deeper level, deeper than we ever imagined" (20). After this tragedy, moved by the recent events, one of the main characters of the story, Lucius Hunt (Joaquin Phoenix), visits the Elders, to whom he offers himself to go to the city in order to avoid further tragedies:

[20] LUCIUS. My mother is unaware of the reason for my visit today. She did not give her consent or consult me in any form. The passing of little Daniel Nicholson, from illness, and other events, have weighted on my thoughts. I ask permission to cross into the forbidden woods and travel to the nearest town. I will gather medicines, and I will return. With regards to Those We Don't Speak Of, I am certain they will let me pass. Creatures can sense emotion and fear. They will see I am pure of intention, and not afraid. The End (00:08:31).

Lucius' speech illustrates that he feels tormented by both the tragedy of little Nicholson and the fear of not being able to react if something similar occurs again. He cannot stand more pain but portrays braveness instead of sinking in his sadness. Such sadness to

which August does not find a solution: “You may run from sorrow, as we have. Sorrow will find you. It can smell you” (00:16:03). This line, again, fits the description of depression in Kübler-Ross’ and Kessler’ work: “This depressive stage feels as though it will last forever” (20). Moments later, Lucius’ mother, Alice Hunt (Sigourney Weaver), one of the Elders, tells her son how she feels regarding his decision:

[21] ALICE. We shall speak of the town, just this once, and we shall never speak of it again.

[22] ALICE. You father left for the market on a Tuesday, at a quarter past nine in the morning. He was found, robbed and naked, in the filthy river, two days later.

[23] LUCIUS. (Begins to shake, and tears stream down his face) Why’d you tell me this blackness?

[24] ALICE. So you will know the nature of what you desire.

[25] LUCIUS. I do not desire it. (Angry) My intentions are true to my word. I think of NOTHING but the people of this village.

[26] ALICE. Forgive me, but I am but scared for my only son’s life.

[27] LUCIUS. I’m not the one with secrets.

[28] ALICE. What is your meaning?

[29] LUCIUS. There are secrets on every corner of this village. Do you not feel it? Do you not see it? (He points at the black box in the corner of the living room).

[30] ALICE. That is for my own well-being, so the evil things from the past are kept close and not forgotten. Forgetting would be to let them be born again in another form (00:22:55-00:24:10).

The line [22] reveals that Alice used to live in the town with her husband until he was brutally murdered. Her trauma explains why Alice does not want Lucius to go to the towns. Moreover, [30] shows that Alice keeps everything related to her past life in a black box, and keeps it locked so her past does not torment her anymore. This situation portrays a broken character that has managed to rebuild her life to some extent, but afraid of suffering again. Then, after the Elders decided to dismiss Lucius’ proposal and the village got back to normal, Lucius falls in love with a woman called Ivy Walker (Bryce Dallas Howard), whose father is the main founder of the village, Edward Walker (William Hurt). Ivy quickly becomes Lucius’ fiancée (00:49:27) and days later they start organizing their wedding. However, Ivy’s close friend, Noah Percy (Adrien Brody), moved by a jealous rage, stabs Lucius in the chest

(00:51:43). Noah is immediately captured, and Lucius, who is deeply wounded, is taken to the hospital. Ivy feels hopeless and thinks she is about to lose the love of her life and asks her father permission to go to the towns to gather medicines, so Lucius has a chance to survive:

[31] IVY. If he dies...all that is life will die with him. I ask permission...to travel through Covington Woods...and go to the towns...to retrieve medicines...that may save...Lucius Hunt. You are my father. I will listen to you in all things. I will trust your decision (00:58:27).

Edward Walker, who feels devastated by the last event, tells Ivy that his father was murdered in the towns, just like Alice's husband. Moreover, he confesses to Ivy that the monsters of the forest never existed, and that it was all a lie plotted by the Elders to protect people from the dangers of the towns (1:12:00). Upon this shocking truth, Ivy keeps asking her father for explanations, and he confesses that they run away from the city to not suffer again: "There is no one in this village who has not lost someone irreplaceable, who has not felt loss so deeply that they questioned the very merit of living at all" (1:12:17). Edward knows that this feeling of deep sorrow is exactly what Ivy is going through, and that is why he will let her go to the towns. Moments later, when the rest of the Elders know about Edward's decision, they express their disagreement, but Edward tells them that he is tired of suffering:

[32] EDWARD. I'm guilty, Robert! I made a decision of the heart! I cannot look into another's eyes and see the same look I see in August's without justification. It is too painful, I cannot bear it (1:15:42).

This line of dialogue explores the emotions of Edward, who feels guilty, in pain, and broken by the recent events, but also proud of his latest decision. As it is portrayed in this exploration of *The Village*, grief is used as a characterization tool that leads to emotions, thoughts and actions that build and develop the character, just like in *Personal Shopper*. Shyamalan himself confirmed in an interview for *The Guardian* the relation between grief

and his works when he was asked by a reader if his movies were influenced by responses of grief:

They are. (...) Grief is something I'm always dealing with. (...) I'm constantly trying to deal with grief making movies like *Old*. Grief is such a beautiful word. It has such tenderness to it. It gives fear dignity. It's lovely that the reader said this. It makes me feel understood (Shyamalan, 8).

3.2. Complicated family bonds

The family bonds between the characters in post-horror movies are progressively damaged as the story goes on, as Rose points: “ [there are] family bonds, which turn from protective to constrictive” (2017, 6). Such process has a similar function to grief in the story, as it leads to emotional responses that explore the characters’ depth. Bridges already suggested such idea: “The relationship between family and horror is nothing new, of course (...) Tony Williams has argued that family horror is a crucial archetype for the genre. But this new set of films seems, more so than in the past, to develop with the emotional depth of middle-class family dramas” (7). Moreover, Church introduces the concept of “gaslighting” which, for him, “serves as a common theme in post-horror films where emotional abuse cannot be immediately ascribed to intergenerational family dynamics” (21). Thus, what follows next is a similar comparison to show how complicated family bonds let us see emotional responses such as guilt, regret, anger or anxiety in *The Babadook* and in *The Sixth Sense*. Kent’s *The Babadook* revolves around a family that is being haunted by a boogeyman called “Mr. Babadook”. The relationship between Amelia Vanek (Essie Davis) and her 6-year-old son, Samuel (Noah Wiseman), was complicated since the moment the boy was born, as Amelia’s husband was killed in a car crash on their way to the hospital to have Samuel. The intrusive thoughts of her son being guilty of the loss of her husband torment Amelia, which makes her keep a physical and emotional distance with her son (00:02:45; 00:34:54). As the story moves forward, Samuel tries to warn his mother about the evil entity that threatens them, but Amelia opts not to listen to her son, denying the existence of the Babadook (00:30:50). This generates anxiety and sadness in Samuel, who questions if he is

actually responsible for everything that is happening and asks his mother: “Is there something wrong with me?” (00:30:20). When the situation becomes more and more tense due to the vital tiredness of Amelia, the family bonds between her and Samuel become totally destructive in the moment that the mother unleashes her anger towards her son:

[33] SAMUEL. Mum...

[34] SAMUEL. I took my pills, but now I feel sick again. (pause) I need to eat something.

[35] AMELIA. (Her eyes are filled with resentment. She closes them).

[36] SAMUEL. I couldn't find any good in the fridge. You said to have them with food. I'm really hungry Mum.

[37] AMELIA. Why do you have to talk-talk-talk all the time? Don't you ever STOP TALKING?

[38] SAMUEL. I was just-

[39] AMELIA. I-NEED-TO-SLEEP.

[40] SAMUEL. I'm sorry Mummy. I was just hungry.

[41] AMELIA. If you're that hungry, why don't you go and EAT SHIT? (00:49:39-00:50:20).

The tension and rage progressively grow in Amelia, until the point that she interrupts her son in [38] and [39]. Amelia loses control of herself in [41], when she denies her son one of the most basic vital functions of a human being: eating. Moments later, the guilt consumes Amelia, who immediately regrets the way she treated her son:

[42] AMELIA. I'm so sorry. I don't know why I said that. That was terrible.

[43] AMELIA. It's just...I've had absolutely no sleep...I didn't know what I was saying (00:50:50).

The aggressive episodes become more and more recurrent alongside the mother's threats to Samuel (00:57:40; 00:59:00). During the final climax of the movie, the Babadook possesses Amelia and tries to kill Samuel. The child then faces the monster that is acting through his mother and finally breaks free of his guilt, revealing the problem that had always been inculcated in the relationship between them:

[44] SAMUEL. I know you don't love me. The Babadook won't let you. But I love you Mummy, ever since I was born, and I always will...

[45] SAMUEL. My dad died because he died. Not because of me... It's not my fault (1:13:30).

Just like grief, complicated family bonds prompt emotional responses such as guilt, anxiety and regret that give us insight on the character's depth. Likewise, in Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*, Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment), an 11-year-old boy, feels overwhelmed by the adverse situations that fill his life. He has a secret: he sees the ghosts of dead people. This frightens him, as they can unexpectedly appear anywhere, and sometimes they even hurt him (00:44:20). However, what truly torments Cole is the fact that he has to bear with his secret on his own, as he feels like he cannot trust his secret with anyone, not even his mother, Lynn Sear (Toni Collette). This is seen when they are having dinner and she asks him why the bumble bee pendant, an object that belonged to Lynn's late mother, was in Cole's drawer. The boy knows that it was actually the ghost of his grandmother who moved it, but when he makes an attempt to talk with his mother about it, she adopts an aggressive attitude, portraying the complicated relationship between Cole and his mother:

[46] LYNN. Did you move the bumble bee pendant?

[47] COLE. (He shakes his head, "No")

[48] LYNN. You didn't move it before. You didn't move it the time after that. And now, you didn't move it again?

[49] COLE. Don't get mad.

[50] LYNN. So, who moved it this time? Maybe someone came in our house, took the bumble bee pendant out of my closet, and then laid it nicely in your drawer? Is that what happened?

[51] COLE. Maybe.

[52] LYNN. I'm so tired, Cole. I'm tired in my body. I'm tired in my mind. I'm tired in my heart. I need a little help here. I don't know if you noticed, but our little family isn't doing so good.

[53] LYNN. I'm praying for us, but I must not be praying right. It looks like we're just going to answer each other's prayers. If we can't talk to each other, we're not going to make it.

[54] LYNN. Now baby...tell me...I won't get mad, honey...Did you take the bumble bee pendant?

[55] COLE. (His eyes start to water up) No.

[56] LYNN. You've had enough roast beef. You need to leave the table.

[57] LYNN. (yells) Go! (1:01:52-1:03:11).

As seen in the dialogue above, Lynn does not give Cole a chance to talk nor to give explanations about the incident, and instead of trying to listen to him, she vents her sorrows to her son, showing evident symptoms of a complex mother-son relationship. In Weinstock's *Critical Approaches to the Films of M. Night Shyamalan* (2010), which includes a variety of essays from different authors which revolve around Shyamalan's films, Rosen comments on a promotional photo of Shyamalan and a child for the American Express "My Life. My Card" campaign which clearly follows the eerie undertone his movies have, pointing out the following: "This image—and its imposition of physical and psychological distance between adult and child—is emblematic of the troubled adult-child relationships depicted in Shyamalan's films" (19). The mix of caretaker talk and rage from Lynn towards her son resembles the feelings that Amelia has towards Samuel in *The Babadook*. The relationship with his mother is not the only complicated one that Cole has, as it quickly becomes clear that he suffers bullying at school when his classmate, Tommy Tammisimo (Trevor Morgan), calls him "freak" and threatens him for no apparent reason (00:19:40). These situations generate anxiety and instability in Cole, who feels alone and misunderstood. When Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), a child psychologist, manages to gain a little of Cole's trust, they have a conversation that shows how Cole cannot share his problems with anyone and that he is the only one responsible for the situation:

[58] COLE. I walk this way with Tommy Tammisimo.

[59] MALCOLM. He your best buddy?

[60] COLE. He hates me.

[61] MALCOLM. Your mom set that up?

[62] COLE. (Cole nods "Yes")

[63] MALCOLM. You ever tell her about how it is with Tommy?

[64] COLE. I don't tell her a thing.

[65] MALCOLM. Why?

[66] COLE. Cause she doesn't look at me like everybody and I don't want her to. I don't want her to know.

[67] MALCOLM. Know what?

[68] COLE. That I'm a freak (00:28:20-00:28:52).

The line [68] shows that Cole feels guilty about everything going around in his life: he blames himself for the bullying he suffers and the mistrust that his mother feels towards him because he thinks of himself as a freak. The deepening in Cole's character shows Shyamalan's use of these relationships to examine a character's emotions in a very similar way to Kent in the post-horror movie *The Babadook*.

This point has explored the function of grief and complicated family bonds in both post-horror and Shyamalan's movies. Whereas grief leads to emotional responses that deal with the overcoming of the loss a loved one, complicated family bonds let us see emotions that the characters feel as a consequence of their damaged relationships. These emotions are used as a technique to further develop and build complex characters.

4. Existential dread

In the header of his article, Rose states that: "a new breed of horror is creeping into the multiplex, replacing jump-scares with existential dread (2017)". Such claim may be divided in two points for clarification purposes: (1.) existential dread as a characteristic of post-horror and (2.) replacement of scenes that contain jump-scares. Whereas the second point will be explored in the next section, I will argue the way existential dread is portrayed and the role it has in both post-horror and Shyamalan's movies in this segment. In his exploration of existential depression, Webb comments the following:

When people undergo a great trauma or other unsettling event—they have lost a job or a loved one dies, for example—their understanding of themselves or of their place in the world often disintegrates, and they temporarily "fall apart," experiencing a type of

depression referred to as existential depression. Their ordeal highlights for them the transient nature of life and the lack of control that we have over so many events, and it raises questions about the meaning of our lives and our behaviors. For other people, the experience of existential depression seemingly arises spontaneously; it stems from their own perception of life, their thoughts about the world and their place in it, as well as the meaning of their life (Webb, 1).

The symptoms that the characters show in post-horror movies fit the definition provided by Webb, as they are stuck in their life, searching for a meaning to their existence. Bridges also comments on this idea: “In all of the films, the characters are stuck at an important life stage that they seem unable to get beyond; nor can they explain why they can’t get beyond it” (12). This is something we have certainly seen in the previous section: In *Personal Shopper*, Maureen cannot accept that his brother is dead and is engaged in all type of rituals to contact him; and in *The Babadook*, Amelia cannot overcome the death of her husband, which makes her not be able to fully love her son. The film *A Ghost Story* (Lowery, 2017) is also a good example of this concept. C (Casey Affleck) dies in a car accident on his way to work. His girlfriend, M (Rooney Mara) goes to identify his body, which is fully covered with a sheet. When M leaves, C gets up, which symbolizes the soul separating from the body. The ghost of C, still covered with the sheet that has two holes resembling the eyes, walks towards the hospital’s exit without anyone noticing his presence. When he reaches the door, a wide shiny gate opens in front of him, but instead of walking towards the light, he decides to return to the house where he lived with M before he died (00:19:50). Without being able to communicate with her, C is trapped in his own existence, condemned to observe how his girlfriend grieves him, and also how she moves forward with her life. M ends up leaving the house, while C endures for centuries, watching new families arrive and new buildings being constructed. Eventually, he tries to commit suicide walking off the building, but instead of dying again, he lands in the past, specifically in the moment his house was being built. Thus, Lowery shows us how the ghost of C is trapped in a time loop for eternity, condemned to witness his own existence over and over again without the possibility to change it nor communicate with anyone. In an interview for *The Guardian*, Lowery talked about where his inspiration to make this film came from: “I was having an existential crisis. I felt everything

was meaningless” (10). It could be argued that the portrayal of existential dread in *A Ghost Story* aims to generate discomfort, uneasiness and angst in the spectator. Bridges comments on the feeling that someone may experience watching a post-horror movie:

Anyone who has taught young people, or raised them, knows that no fear comes close to resembling that which we feel for a lost child: the parent of a college student you teach sending an email saying he’s not picking up the phone, the eighth grader whom you can’t find for a moment on a field trip but turns up behind you. Like the instinctive breathlessness felt when a toddler careens backwards and we can’t help wanting to rush to catch them. (...) It’s a similar breathlessness that I’ve felt – and a similar set of questions that I’ve considered – as I’ve wandered through the recent turn in psychological horror, a turn that Steve Rose, in 2017, dubbed “post-horror” (Bridges, 4, 5).

Existential dread is described in a very similar way in Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense*, this time in the dead people that Cole sees. According to the child, “They don’t see each other. They only see what they want to see. They don’t know they are dead” (00:50:50). Thus, this means that they are stuck in life while they should be in the afterlife, and they are confused by the fact that they are ignored by their loved ones, since the living cannot see them except for Cole, who has a gift to be able to see ghosts. The concept of existential dread in *The Sixth Sense* is even more detailed in Malcolm, Cole’s child psychologist. Malcolm thinks that his wife is mad at him because he invests a lot of time in his work, helping Cole. However, Malcolm eventually finds out the truth: she was not mad at him. She simply could not see him because Malcolm was actually dead all along (1:37:55). This proves how eighteen years before Lowery, Shyamalan portrayed characters being literally stuck between life and death and searching for the meaning of life. On *Critical Approaches to Shyamalan’s Films*, Weinstock talks about the characters’ search for a meaning in their lives being a recurrent pattern in Shyamalan’s movies:

In each of Shyamalan's major releases, we start with broken people in a fallen, lifeless world and witness to varying degrees the ways in which narrative restores coherence and effects the spiritualization of desiccated secular existence (Weinstock, 2010: XI).

Moreover, in the case of Shyamalan's *Signs*, existential dread is depicted through the character of the former priest Graham Hess (Mel Gibson), who lost his wife six months before the time the movie is set in, which left him in charge of his children, Morgan Hess (Rory Culkin) and Bo Hess (Abigail Breslin), with the help of his brother, Merrill Hess (Joaquin Phoenix). After the unexpected death of his wife, he left the Church and with it, his faith. This faith crisis makes him question how God could let his wife die. He rejects any bond to Church, which is seen in his reaction when some people in the village still call him "Father": "Caroline...please, stop calling me 'Father'" (00:09:40). When the planet is waiting for an imminent alien invasion, Merrill asks him if he is hopeful about the situation:

[69] MERRILL. Some people are probably thinking this is the end of the world.

[70] GRAHAM. That's true.

[71] MERRILL. Do you think it could be?

[72] GRAHAM. Yes.

[73] MERRILL. How can you say that?

[74] GRAHAM. That wasn't the answer you wanted?

[75] MERRILL. Couldn't you pretend like you used to be? Give me some comfort (00:41:02-00:41:44).

Whereas [75] confirms the change of beliefs that Graham has undergone during the last 6 months, [72] shows how a former priest, which is commonly known as a figure of hope and optimism, now represents skepticism and hopelessness. This antithesis becomes clearer moments later, when Graham confirms his stance regarding the possible alien invasion: "There is no one watching out for us, Merrill. We are all on our own" (00:45:56). This line shows how Graham feels about how God abandoned him and his family, and thus, there is no reason for him to believe that the Lord will help them now. In his exploration of existential dread, Bradley considers "the absence of deity" to be a possible trigger for meaninglessness (415). Although Graham experiences existential dread on a deeper level, he is not the only one in the story. Ray Redmond (M. Night Shyamalan), the man who accidentally killed Graham's wife with the car, manages to lock an alien in the pantry of his house, and calls the former priest in a panic attack. Graham picks up the phone, but no one answers, so he goes

to Ray's house, who is seen outside of the house, waiting inside his car, as he is about to drive to a safer place:

[76] GRAHAM. What happened, Ray?

[77] RAY. I wrote your number down to call you. It's been sitting next to the phone for six months. When I knew it was inside the house, I couldn't think of any other number to call. I panicked.

[78] RAY. Thank you for coming, Father.

[79] GRAHAM. You're welcome, Ray.

[80] RAY. I worked so long that night. I ain't never fallen sleep driving before. And never since. Most of the ride home, there wasn't a car insight in either direction. If I'd fallen asleep then, I'd have ended up in a ditch with a headache.

[81] RAY. It had to happen at that right moment. That certain ten-fifteen seconds when I passed her walking. It was like it was meant to be.

[82] RAY. I guess if this is the end of the world, I'm screwed right? People who kill Reverends' wives aren't exactly ushered to the front of the line in heaven (00:55:12-00:56:30).

The line [77] reveals that Ray was not brave enough to call Graham when the accident took place, which means that he has been living with that burden for 6 months, stuck in his guilt. He has been accumulating all his feelings until [80], when he opens up to Graham, providing him with his explanation. Even though he got it off his chest, [82] shows that he does not feel better at all, as he thinks that what he has done will have consequences in the afterlife too. Then, Ray feels trapped, as his burden is enormous, and he knows that it will chase him forever. Although Shyamalan implemented this technique of generating anxious sensations in horror movies, such tool is not new in the filming scene, as the American filmmaker David Lynch used it in his work *The Elephant Man* (1980), a melodramatic film about a man that has severe deformities on his face. The protagonist, John Merrick (John Hurt) is misunderstood and mistreated by society because of his physical appearance, which makes him question the meaning of his life.

In summary, we have explored the existential dread that the characters experience throughout the story in both post-horror and Shyamalan's movies, as they are unable to move on from a stage of their life. The portrayal of the characters being stuck in their lives create a pessimist and meaninglessness atmosphere that aims to generate a sensation of discomfort and angst in the audience.

5. Jump-Scares and Ambiguity

As mentioned in the previous point, this section will focus on Rose's premise about the replacement of jump-scares in post-horror movies. Moreover, the relationship between this alleged substitution and the ambiguous scenes featured in both post-horror and Shyamalan's films will be discussed.

5.1. Departing from Shock Value

Church defines jump-scares as "sudden audiovisual shocks (as produced through quick cuts, loud aural stingers, and startling intrusions hidden by frame edges)" (12), that is, a technique that aims to shock the audience. This technique is not inherent to the horror genre, but rather is the shock value, that is, the potential of a scene to generate surprise, disgust or other bodily sensations in the audience. Thus, the expression used by Rose is unfortunate, simplistic and inaccurate, as he generalizes horror films stating that all of them have jump-scares, which is nothing more than another failed attempt from Rose to characterize a genre. Moreover, there does not seem to be a full replacement of the shock value in post-horror movies, as they are not completely extent from surprise or disgust. For instance, *The Babadook* has jump-scares in the minutes 00:49:23 and 00:54:26. Also, *A Ghost Story* features a jump-scare in 1:06:23. However, it could be argued that post-horror movies seem to depart from the shock value that is typical from the horror genre in favor of other ways to stimulate the audience. Bridges considers a change of focus: "Films like *Mother!*, *The Witch*, *A Ghost Story*, *Hereditary*, *It Comes at Night*, *The Eyes of My Mother*, *The Babadook*, *The Haunting of Hill House*, *Goodnight Mommy* and *Get Out* frequently stress

the uncanny image and a slow dread of the future over suspense and surprise” (6). Church also does not see a full disappearance of shock value in post-horror movies: “When viscerally shocking moments do occasionally occur in post-horror films, they are more likely used to signal major traumatizing events, and therefore used to greater thematic effect than as disposably of ‘cheap’ scares” (18). In my estimation, even though they are far from being extent from shock value, post-horror movies contain scenes that rather rely on ambiguity to invite the spectator to use their imagination. As we are about to see, ambiguous scenes were also used by Shyamalan in his works. Thus, let us proceed with an exploration of ambiguity in the post-horror films *The Babadook* and *Personal Shopper* and then in Shyamalan's *Signs* and *The Sixth Sense*.

5.2. Ambiguous Scenes

Church states that the scenes in post-horror rely on a "slow-building tension and sources of fear emerging from small details in the *mise-en-scène* (such as glimpsed hints of a monster)" (12). Although Church does not explicitly mention ambiguity, the example he puts about the glimpsed hints of a monster is related to the point. *The Babadook* is a great example of this type of scenes. Amelia, who is frightened by the presence of an evil entity in her house, decides to go to the police station to report the events that have been occurring to her family lately (00:38:52). As the police officers are asking her questions, Amelia notices a figure on a coat hanger that resembles the Babadook's clothes, which makes her panic and flee from the building (00:39:44). Whereas the figure clearly shares similarities with the Babadook's clothes, it is not clear whether it was actually the monster or the suggestion of the character, leaving this question to the imagination of the spectator to judge what they have just processed. These types of ambiguous scenes are also featured in Shyamalan's films. For example, in *Signs*, Bo (Graham's daughter) wakes her father up with an innocent but unsettling statement: “There is a monster outside my room. Can I have a glass of water?” (00:12:07). When Graham goes to check her room to calm his daughter, he looks innocently through the window, not expecting to see anything. Suddenly, he sees a human-shaped figure in the dark distance, standing on the roof, making no movement whatsoever, as if it was

lurking around (00:13:23). Later on, another scene with similar characteristics is presented, when Graham decides to investigate his crops at night. The deep darkness of the night makes Graham unable to see properly, since he is only carrying a flashlight. Eventually, he hears a weird noise behind him, and his flashlight falls to the ground. When he is picking it up, the light emanated from the flashlight illuminates what looks like a leg of a being from another world stepping into the crops to camouflage itself in them, which makes Graham panic and run away (00:38:13). These cuts make use of darkness to suggest an alien wandering around Graham's house rather than show it, which aims to have the spectator's imagination involved. David Sterritt comments on the relation between ambiguity and the spectator's imagination in Shyamalan's films: "As an open-minded outlook based on resistance to the simplistic lure of either/ or logic, ambiguity can be a powerful tool; as an irresolute reaction to the ever-present fears, uncertainties, and futilities of the human condition, it can be a refuge from decision and pretext for sloppy, constricted, and childish magical thinking" (53). Similarly, in *The Sixth Sense*, there is a scene with similar characteristics. Cole is in the bathroom when a figure passes by quickly covering the entire screen (00:54:45). The spectator could not see what it was, though they can guess it is one of the dead people that Cole sees, as it is revealed moments later.

This section of the characterization of post horror has explored how, while not completely extent from shock value, both post-horror and Shyamalan's films move away from the shock value cuts typically featured in conventional horror movies in favor of ambiguous scenes that aim to stimulate the imagination of the spectator.

6. A New Name

As seen in the introduction of this work, Rose comments on the origin of the term "post-horror", which comes from its similarities with "postmodern", since both break pre-established rules (2022, 1). Thus, his intention was to put out a term that suggested novelty and that broke the rules of the horror genre. It is arguable that during the 2010s there was a wave of movies sharing the same characteristics. Nevertheless, it has been proved that the

2010 decade is not the date of emergence of this sub-genre, as Shyamalan was already making movies with these characteristics in 1999, 2002 and 2004, and thus, it is not emergent. Still, it does not seem like Shyamalan broke the rules of the horror genre, but he rather gave them a different meaning and function for their inclusion. What Shyamalan did was deepen into some elements that were already included in horror films, such as grief, complicated family bonds or the meaning of life, which gave birth to a new variant within the wide horror genre. Then, post-horror is not new nor breaks the rules of the genre, which makes the “post-horror” label inaccurate. That is why it is necessary to assign a new name to it.

The process of naming this sub-genre will be supported by the following foundations: (1.) it needs to be descriptive of its characterization and recognizable at first sight, and (2.) it needs to avoid elitism. Rose, in fact, had to stand for himself from people who accused his “post-horror” term of being elitist in his second article (2022, 1). Moreover, Bridges comments that "Nia Edwards-Behi has rightly called Rose’s definition of post-horror elitist – that, for Rose, post-horror as an auteurist avant-garde ignores the ways that horror films have always stylized and experimented with conventions" (5). Also, Church dismisses the “post-horror” term as “one of many flawed attempts to name a corpus of recent films” (3), besides other popular terms used to re-name post-horror such as "smart horror" (36), "prestige horror" (39) or "elevated horror" (45) due to their elitist connotation which suggests that this sub-genre is above the rest.

As we have seen, both Shyamalan and post-horror filmmakers deep into the emotions and responses of the characters, such as grief, guilt or regret, and even their relationships with their families. They also probe into their search for a meaning in their lives. Even the departure from shock value lets us explore the fear, confusion, disillusion, suggestion or paranoia of the characters, which is contemplated by Church: “With the de-emphasis on jump-scaries, there may also be more investment in developing psychologically complex protagonists” (12). That is why I consider the term “deep horror” to be descriptive of this sub-genre, as it encompasses the main characteristics of both Shyamalan’s and post-horror movies. Contrary to “post-horror”, “deep horror” does not suggest the breaking of the horror

genre's rules. Also, it does not suggest superiority from an intellectual perspective such as "smart horror" and "elevated horror", neither does it from a social position point of view, such as "prestige horror". The term "deep horror" comes from the characterization of the sub-genre, taking into account that is not above the rest of the other horror sub-genres. Thus, I consider "deep horror" to be an accurate term for this sub-genre.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the role of the elements proposed by Rose for the characterization of post-horror in order to set it apart from the rest of the sub-genres. In such exploration, the following conclusions have been found: (1.) The concepts of grief and complicated family bonds are used as techniques to deepen into the characters, as they let us observe in them the expression of negative emotions such as guilt, anxiety, regret, sadness or despair; (2.) The characters of this set of movies suffer from existential crises in which they are stuck in a stage of their life (or death) from which they cannot move forward due to a traumatic event that has deeply affected them. This portrayal of existential dread seeks to generate discomfort and angst in the audience; and (3.) The shock value of the post-horror scenes is not replaced by existential dread like Rose believes, as they still contain surprise and disgust. Instead, there is a change of focus to scenes that rely on ambiguity to stimulate the imagination of the audience.

It has also been proved that this sub-genre does not emerge in the 2010 decade as Rose points out. Rather it appeared at the hands of the filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan, who already made movies with the same characteristics as the post-horror ones by the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. This demonstration has been conducted through a comparison between films considered as post-horror (*Personal Shopper*, *The Babadook*, *A Ghost Story*) and Shyamalan's works *The Sixth Sense*, *Signs* and *The Village*.

Lastly, both the new characterization and origin of this sub-genre has led to the necessity of a new term that better describes it, since the label "post-horror" was come up by

Rose from its similarities with "postmodern", in which post-horror supposedly broke the rules of an established genre, which has been debunked. That is why, considering the importance of deepening into the characters in both post-horror and Shyamalan's films and, at the same time, avoiding an elitist connotation, the name "deep horror" is more accurate to refer to this sub-genre that, by no means, is new, but has been among us for more than two decades.

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