



# Journal of Religion & Film

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Volume 6  
Issue 2 October 2002

Article 12

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12-14-2016

## Signs

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### Recommended Citation

DeGiglio-Bellemare, Mario (2016) "Signs," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol6/iss2/12>

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# Signs

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *Signs* (2002).

I tried very hard to like *Signs*, the new horror/fantasy/sci-fi film directed by M. Night Shyamalan. Why? For one thing, I think the horror genre is a serious film genre. Secondly, while I think horror films are ultimately about confrontation, they also reveal much about the anxieties of our times. Thirdly, the narrative core of *Signs* (an alien attack) is designed to be an allegory for the recovery of Christian faith.

The main character, played by Mel Gibson, is an Episcopal priest living in rural Pennsylvania who leaves his church and his God after the tragic death of his wife. An alien attack and the near death of his son, on the other hand, will bring him back to his faith, and ultimately to his Episcopal vocation.

Shyamalan, born in Pondicherry, India, and raised in suburban Philadelphia, makes what I like to call "Uptown Horror." Uptown Horror works as a kind of apologia for a film genre that is considered adolescent to many cinemagoers. But Uptown Horror also has the potential to be politically reactionary under its veneer of seriousness. *The Silence of the Lambs* is a good example, characterizing itself as a serious feminist perspective within the serial killer genre, but ultimately constructing evil through deeply homophobic/transphobic lenses. I think *Signs* is another good example of this trend.

*Signs* works beautifully in the first half, slowly building a sense of paranoia on par with the best of 1950s space invader films, which reflected the anxiety of the "Red menace" in the U.S. of that time. Horror is at its best when it reflects social anxieties and confronts its audience with the specter of "otherness." In *Signs*, the alien invasion is a radical break of "otherness" into the normalcy of the lives of the main characters. This rupture is an allegorical break into the doubts of Hess, a rupture that pushes him to let go of his fear and find the courage to go on. The Christian tradition teaches that "otherness," at least in the form of marginal otherness, is where we can find the face of God. Sometimes, that face can look monstrous as when Jon Sobrino writes about how the poor and marginalized are made to look like the Suffering Servant: "as one from whom others hide their faces" (Isa 53: 3).

On the surface, the intruders in *Signs* are meant to invoke a crisis that is set up to rekindle the faith of Father Graham Hess. These intruders are defeated in the film when Father Hess finally opens up to God's grace in his life instead of clinging to fear. However, what does this film really mean when it speaks of faith? The Christian tradition often teaches that faith and fear are radically opposed: faith challenges us to be vulnerable and open to "others," fear clings to safety and conformity. But faith and doubt on the other hand are usually constitutive of each other. They are not opposed to each other as they are in *Signs*, where Hess either

doubts or has faith - as evidenced in his speech about there being two class of people, those who believe in miracles and those who believe in luck. Moreover, faith is not optimism, the idea that in the end things will be better; faith is a courageous trust in the journey itself, rather than the end goal.

In *Signs*, the alien invaders are always glimpsed alone and vulnerable. There is no actual fighting in the film, only a surging feeling of menace and unease. The aliens are indeed strange invaders, more spooky than threatening. Even in the last scene, where the alien threatens the life of Morgan, Hess' son, we are confronted with an alien that is ambiguous in his relation to the humans: pausing with the child, scared that his ship has left him stranded, disoriented, frightened, we are not sure. Yet in this same scene we are witnesses to an attack on the alien that is quite shocking. When Merrill Hess (Joaquin Pheonix) takes a baseball bat to the head and body of the alien I was terrified because the image that was conjured in that moment for me was reminiscent of right-wing vigilante forms of violence - such as a skinhead attack on a queer youth, or more to the point, on an illegal alien (the immigrant kind). While the aliens are supposed to be invaders, what comes across is quite the opposite: the attack by Merrill reveals a frail vulnerable creature who collapses under the brutality of the bat and dies due to the effect of spilt water on its organism.

This is not the faith of the tradition that honors the praxis of God's Reign, proclaimed by Jesus, on behalf of the poor and outcast; it is nothing other than faith as optimism, an optimism that is secure in its ideology of domination over and against "otherness." You can really win this war, if only you would release your fear and believe. This is the underlying message of Father Hess' faith in the film. And the war is indeed won; the aliens have scampered back to their own homes. War is not an abstract term here; it speaks clearly to anxieties in the U.S. about terrorist attacks on their country. And they can win this war, if only they have faith that in the end there is no such thing as luck.

In these post- 09/11 times, times where immigrants and other so-called aliens, foreigners, and intruders are indeed very vulnerable, the kind of faith promoted in *Signs* has more to do with an optimism that George W. Bush's anti-terrorism campaign will succeed rather than with faith in a God of life. German feminist theologian, Dorothy Sölle, reminds us that faith without doubt is not stronger, but merely more ideological. For Shyamalan, faith without doubt is indeed stronger; it crushes aliens to oblivion, for it harbors an ideology that sees faith as victory over the intrusion of doubt.