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## ‘They only see what they wanna see’: Traumatised Ghosts and Ghost Story Conventions in *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others*

**Abstract:** The essay elaborates on post-mortem films whose ghost-protagonists do not know that they are dead. It takes its point of departure from cognitive narratology and assumes that *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* disguise their narrative unreliability under the cover of established ghost story conventions. It is argued that the films’ unreliability is based on their main characters’ restricted perception which is caused by their dissociative amnesia, that is, they repress the memories of their violent death. Apart from discussing the symptoms of trauma that the protagonists display, it is shown how the discovery and acceptance of their actual demise solves the inner and outer conflicts in the respective ghost story.

### Introduction

In a small village in Kansas, the young woman Mary Henry (Candace Hilligoss) is on a day trip with two friends when they accept a challenge to drag race, but are forced off of a narrow wooden bridge. The car sinks into the murky depths, and all the three women are assumed drowned. Although the police and volunteers search for the wreckage in vain, sometime later, and to everyone’s surprise, Mary emerges unharmed from the river, but she cannot remember how she survived. After her recovery, she accepts a new job in Salt Lake City. While driving to Utah, Mary suddenly sees a horrid apparition, a deathlike figure dressed in a tuxedo, with black-rimmed eyes and white hair (Herk Harvey, also the director and producer of the film), that arouses fear and dread in the young woman. The apparition, referred to as ‘the man’, continues to haunt Mary as the story progresses. He seems to be drawing her toward an old abandoned seaside carnival pavilion on the outskirts of town, finally luring her to take part in a macabre dance with other ghouls. Mary, however, runs off. She tries to escape the ghastly apparitions in pursuit of her but tumbles and lies screaming before the gruesome figures close in around her. The very last scene of the film shows the car wreck being hauled out of the river containing the dead bodies of Mary and her two companions, thus revealing that Mary has died in the initial car accident and has been experiencing some kind of hallucinatory nightmare in the split seconds before her death.

Although the cult film *Carnival of Souls* (1962) features supernatural and macabre elements, it is not a conventional ghost story about spirits learning not to linger. Instead it focuses on characters that do not know that they are dead<sup>1</sup>. The final plot twist reveals that the protagonist, who has provided the main narrative point of view in the story and with whom the film viewers have identified, has in fact been dead for the better part of the story. While the audience assumes that the unfolding story of *Carnival of Souls* as well as Mary's terrifying encounters with 'the man' are shown from a more or less unrestricted viewpoint, the presentation of events is actually limited to Mary's perception, imagination and cognition, adhering to the narrative mode of internal focalisation (Genette 1980, 191–205). Since the cinematic narrator<sup>2</sup> avoids to point out the changeover from showing the objective fictional truth (after the car crashes into the river below the three female passengers have drowned) to presenting the subjective perspective of a character that dominates the filmic presentation (Mary has survived the car accident unharmed but is haunted by appalling ghouls), *Carnival of Souls* makes effective use of unreliable narration by disguising the ontological status of its mediated images<sup>3</sup>, thus prompting the viewers to draw false conclusions as regards the story.

There have been occasional film and television productions that feature characters who are either unaware of being in a state between life and death or have actually died, e.g., *La Rivière du Hubou* (1962)<sup>4</sup>, *Haunts of the Very Rich* (1972), *Voices* (1973), *Jacob's Ladder* (1990). It is however M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999), the second highest-grossing film of 1999 and among the top hundred highest-grossing films in history, that not only revitalised this genre but developed it further. Making use of a surprise ending that demands a radical reinterpretation of the proceeding narrative, *The Sixth Sense* is a representative of post-mortem films whose ghost-protagonists walk among the living being literally oblivious to their own demise.

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- 1 Wilshire (2007) points out that *Carnival of Souls* might have been inspired by the episode "The Hitch Hiker" (1960) from the television show *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964).
  - 2 Cf. Chatman, who defines the cinematic narrator as "the composite of a large and complex variety of communicating devices" (1990, 134).
  - 3 The ontological status of the images is usually clearly indicated in traditional Hollywood cinema. Even if the film camera shows a character's dreams, memories, visions or hallucinations, the 'subjective distortion' is conventionally framed with the help of narrative techniques like a transitional voice-over, close up, or dissolve (cf. Helbig 2005, 135).
  - 4 The short film is an adaptation of Ambrose Pierce's story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (1890). It was screened in 1964 as an episode of the US television series *The Twilight Zone*.

The critical and economic success of *The Sixth Sense* caused a proliferation of films that depict either the afterlife from the point of view of the newly deceased, who have yet to discover that they are dead, or whose characters are dying, e.g., *The Others* (2001), *Mulholland Dr* (2001), *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Soul Survivors* (2001), *Hellraiser: Hellseeker* (2002), *Dead End* (2003), *Lost Things* (2003), *November* (2004), *The I Inside* (2004), *The Jacket* (2005), *Stay* (2005), *Reeker* (2005), *The Dark Hours* (2005), *The Descent* (2005), *The Abandoned* (2006), *Wind Chill* (2007), *The Deaths of Ian Stone* (2007), *The Escapist* (2008), *Passengers* (2008), *No Man's Land: The Rise of Reeker* (2008), *Haunting of Winchester House* (2009), *Shadow* (2009), and *Wound* (2010).

Films like *Haunts of the Very Rich*, *The Others* or *Passengers* make it practically impossible for the audience to infer that the unfolding mystery is part of the characters' afterlife, because the physical death of the protagonist is not shown onscreen. In contrast, horror films such as *Hellraiser: Hellseeker*, *The Descent*, *Lost Things*, or *The Sixth Sense*, show that their protagonists are involved in a life-threatening event, for instance a car accident, in the first act of the story, which offers the viewers the opportunity to suspect that the characters might undergo some post-mortem experience. Films containing an hallucinatory alternate story that exists in the mind of the characters who are dying usually take the shape of a psychological thriller and can be interpreted as the characters' symbolic flight from being persecuted by death shortly before they actually die (e.g., *Carnival of Souls*, *Jacob's Ladder*, *The I Inside*, *Stay*, *The Escapist*).

*The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* are built around a climatic perceptual twist while disguising their narrative unreliability under the cover of established generic conventions of the ghost story. As will be shown in this paper, both feature haunted houses, clairvoyant children as well as ghost-protagonists who either frighten those they haunt, who contact the living in order to help them to clear up their unfinished business, or who watch benevolently over a loved one. Based on the conventional topic of the ghost story that the spirits of the deceased need to come to terms with their violent death in order to 'move on', the obstacle presented in both films is that the protagonists suffer from dissociative amnesia, repressing the memory of their demise. Since the characters are initially unable to recall the traumatic experience of their death, the subsequent story represents their involuntary recovery of that memory leading to the resolution of their actual inner conflict.

## *The Sixth Sense*

The opening scene of *The Sixth Sense* shows Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), a distinguished child-psychologist, and his wife Anna (Olivia Williams) at home. They are in the middle of a celebration when they discover a break-in. It turns out that the highly distressed intruder, Vincent (Donnie Wahlberg), is one of Malcolm's former patients. After blaming Malcolm for having failed to help him, Vincent shoots Malcolm and himself. The seven minute prologue ends with a top shot of Malcolm<sup>5</sup>, who lies on top of his bed and puts pressure on his gunshot wound (fig. 1), before the picture fades to black, thus implying that Malcolm will not survive the critical incident.

Despite the fact that the fade to black at the end of the first scene hints at Malcolm's inevitable death, the transitional black screen, as well as the establishing shot of the second scene intend to trick the audience into believing that Malcolm has in fact recuperated from his severe injuries. The black screen following the prologue is shown for ten (!) seconds, which could suggest that Malcolm's recovery might take a very long time. Still, with the narrative's aim of concealing that Malcolm's spirit walks the earth throughout the forthcoming story, the black screen epitomises the film's essential paralipsis, a narrative effect that omits "one of the constituent elements of a situation in a period that the narrative does generally cover" (Genette 1980, 52).<sup>6</sup> Since the narrative withholds the crucial information that Malcolm had actually died at the end of the first scene, presenting therefore less information than the narrative mode is able to provide, *The Sixth Sense* is an example of unreliable filmic narration that is based on underreporting (Phelan/Martin 1999, 95).

The establishing shot that follows the prologue (fig. 2) is also conceived to set the viewers on the wrong track. The long shot shows a Georgian style residential complex with Malcolm sitting on a bench in the lower right hand corner. It also displays the caption "The Next Fall South Philadelphia". Although the narrative commentary appears to be more or less objective in setting up the context of

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5 Quite a few contemporary films use top shots to imply that the soul of the deceased has just left the body looking down on the corpse, e.g., *Gladiator* (2000), *Confidence* (2003), *The I Inside*, *Stay*.

6 For the reason that the paralipsis is an effective narrative tool for creating plot twists or surprises, it is typically used in crime or detective stories, and in films that employ unreliable narration, e.g., *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Fight Club* (1999), *The Machinist* (2004). Crucial information that the narrative withholds from the viewers by using a paralipsis is usually handed in later in form of a flashback.

the scene, and in fact the remainder of the film, the year the story is set in is not mentioned. What can be inferred from this missing piece of information is that the narrative’s underreporting is connected to Malcolm’s restricted perception, knowledge, and thoughts. As will be pointed out by Malcolm in the story (12:30, 25:31), he has lost his track of time.<sup>7</sup> His forgetfulness is one symptom that goes hand in hand with his inability to recall the traumatic experience of his violent death. Since the first half of the upcoming narrative basically shows what Malcolm knows, the establishing shot of the second scene is not presented from an unrestricted perspective but represents Malcolm’s subjective viewpoint.

Fig. 1 Top shot of Malcolm in *The Sixth Sense*



Fig. 2 Establishing shot of the second scene in *The Sixth Sense*



What follows in the story is that Malcolm observes the 9-year-old Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment), who is anxious and not communicating well with his mother (Toni Collette), a working-class single mother. Malcolm starts to counsel Cole, visiting his home and school. Apart from Malcolm’s conversations with Cole, the viewers see Malcolm struggling to regain a close relationship with his wife. The main questions that the audience wants to see resolved and which help to establish the genre of mystery in the film’s first half are, ‘What is the cause for Cole’s behavior?’ and ‘What is going to happen to Malcolm’s marriage?’.

Although *The Sixth Sense* was promoted as a ghost story (cf. Ebert 1999), it explicitly admits to this genre after its half over. Following a particularly traumatic incident for Cole that had him locked in an attic where he sustained suspicious injuries, Malcolm persuades Cole to tell him his secret: “I see dead people [...w]alking around like regular people. They don’t see each other. They only see what they wanna see. They don’t know they’re dead” (48:22–48:53). With this pivotal moment in the story, the narrative also presents Cole’s perspective. As a result,

7 Foust and Soukup (2006, 126) observe that the narrative is foggy in its attention to causal sequence after Malcolm is shot in that the scenes are not clearly linked by transitions, hardly ever tracking Malcolm as he moves from place to place or from day to day.

the audience starts to 'see dead people' too. Cole mostly encounters the spirits of people who have died violent deaths and who visit his home. Their sudden appearances as well as their gruesome looks add solid horror effects to the *The Sixth Sense*. In view of the fact that Cole is scared of and haunted by the apparitions, the narrative's second half blends cinematic genres, drawing on the technical elements of the psychological thriller, domestic drama and classic horror to create tension.

Even though Malcolm is not convinced that Cole's statement is true, Cole's observation will eventually help him to gain self-knowledge concerning his own mortality. The real cause why the deceased 'only see what they wanna see' can be deduced from Malcolm's case. Since the memory of his time of death is blocked out (the aforementioned paralipsis), Malcolm continues 'to exist' in his familiar framework. Behaving like nothing has changed since the evening when he was shot, Malcolm holds on to his roles as a loving husband and as a child psychologist.

In the context of the film's emphasis on the therapist-patient relationship that flows in both directions, the splitting of the leading role into two is very efficient. Since Malcolm cannot see the spirits of the people that trouble Cole, he initially resists a paranormal diagnosis but concludes that Cole's anxieties resemble those of Vincent. After listening to one of Vincent's taped sessions and hearing the voice of a deceased, which he takes as evidence of supernatural visitation, Malcolm eventually gives Cole the paternal advice to listen to what the apparitions have to tell him. Cole starts to talk to the ghosts and comes to understand that they seek his help in communicating with the living. After Cole has learned to accept his sixth sense, he is able to tell his mother about his gift, which rebuilds their mutual trust. Additionally, he becomes the ghosts' counselor, which is highlighted by the fact that he advises Malcolm to talk to his wife in her sleep. The sight of his wedding ring dropping from Anna's hand triggers Malcolm's flashback of the night of his death visualised by the dramatic device of the cinematic flashback. The sudden recall of his trauma is followed by the discovery that he is a ghost too, which then gives way to acceptance. Malcolm's knowledge about his actual identity and existence, his recognition of the paranormal, as well as his ability to finally communicate with his wife are all due to Cole.

As regards ghost story conventions, Malcolm's spirit walks the streets of Philadelphia in order to attend to his unfinished business. At the very moment when he accepts his death, he is able to move on: "I think I can go now. Just needed to do a couple of things. Needed to help someone. I think I did" (1:36:30–1:36:52). Since Malcolm doubted his professional ability after having failed Vincent, he got a chance to redeem himself through helping Cole. Malcolm's second concern, his

(false) conviction that his wife has distanced herself from him, is another frustration to him.<sup>8</sup> Anna’s possible motivation is brought up in the film’s prologue when she comments the award Malcolm received from the city for his outstanding achievement in the field of child-psychology by saying, “you’ve put everything second including me” (05:30). In the end, Malcolm comes to understand that Anna had not tried to cool off their relationship but actually needed to come to terms with the loss of her husband. He tells her that she never came second to his profession allowing him to say goodbye to her.

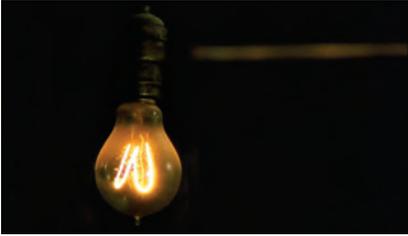
As Freeland points out, the horror in *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* “is subtle and lingering, a matter of mood rather than monsters” (2004, 189). Considering the cinematography of the *The Sixth Sense*, especially the lightning, the (at times expressionist) framing of the characters, and the transitional shots showing Philadelphian fountains, church spires, gargoyles, or house ornamentation help to establish the film’s gothic atmosphere.<sup>9</sup> They create “what feels like a dream world, an almost mythic space disconnected from any American ‘everyday’” (Foust/Soukup 2006, 126).

In *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others*, the narrative focuses on the ghost-protagonists’ ordeals to eventually see the light, that is their discovery and recognition of their own death, which is already implied by the films’ first images. *The Sixth Sense*’s instant presentation of a light bulb in the basement of Malcolm’s home (fig. 3) as well as *The Other*’s extreme close up of a chiaroscuro woodcut that shows a divine light (fig. 4) symbolise that the story is about the search for truth and knowledge. The first picture in *The Sixth Sense* also creates a symbolic context for Malcolm’s task to retrieve the memory of his trauma. The light bulb is located in his cellar, which correspondingly is one of the conventional settings of gothic fiction ever since Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). In *The Sixth Sense*, Malcolm spends a lot of time in his house’s basement. Suffice it to say that the subterranean space represents his unconscious. This is supported by the fact that Malcolm repeatedly finds the basement door locked (15:14, 39:37), but ‘somehow’ manages to unlock it.

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8 Malcolm’s ‘problems’ concerning his marriage can merely be touched upon in this essay. Foust and Soukup (2006) analyse Malcolm’s character in the postindustrial age as well as his masculinity crisis. Barratt (2009), on the other hand, explores the film’s use of primacy effects and schemas that make the viewers overlook that Malcolm is in fact a ghost.

9 The recurring dropping of ambient temperature in the story is an uncanny element that hints at supernatural visitations (15:04, 28:18, 52:22, 1:12:42, 1:34:58, 1:36:23).

Fig. 3 *The first image in The Sixth Sense*Fig. 4 *The Others' first shot*

### *The Others*

*The Others* uses classical features of gothic fiction. It is a frame narrative set in the past. In 1945, just after the Second World War, Grace Stewart (Nicole Kidman) and her children, Anne (Alakina Mann) and Nicholas (James Bentley), live in an isolated and fogbound mansion on the island of Jersey. Grace's husband has never returned from fighting in the war, while the children are dangerously photosensitive and must be kept guarded from sunlight. Since all her servants have disappeared without warning, Grace had placed an advertisement for servants in the letterbox. The story begins with the arrival of three former servants of the house, Mr. Tuttle (Aldo Grilo), the mute Lydia (Elaine Cassidy) and Mrs. Mills (Fionnula Flanagan), who offer their services and whose appearance strikes the viewers as old fashioned, even for 1945. Shortly after, Grace detects that her letter containing the ad is still in the letterbox. She wants an explanation from Mrs. Mills who replies that they came by on the off chance that they would be needed in a house as big as this.

Fig. 5 *Establishing shot of The Others*Fig. 6 *First close up of Grace in The Others*

The genre of the haunted house story is already set up by the establishing shot (fig. 5). It presents a mansion whose mirror picture in the nearby pond together with the film's evocative title implies that 'the others' pose a threat to the inhabit-

ants or represent some ‘dark’ forces in the house<sup>10</sup>. What the narrative however cleverly manages to conceal from the viewers is that *The Others*’ story is primarily presented from the perspective of the spirits that haunt the house. In this context, the film’s mystery and suspense is created by showing the divergent opinions of Grace, Anne and Mrs. Mills which leave the audience in doubt as regards their respective trustworthiness (cf. Helbig 2011, 353–356). Grace is shown to be a highly strung woman and overprotective mother<sup>11</sup>, who suffers from migraines. Her bossy behavior can be attributed to her distressing situation of having to protect the house from Nazi intruders whilst missing her husband. Anne, in contrast, constantly challenges her mother. She speaks of visitors in the house no one else can see, a young boy named Victor, his parents and an old woman. Moreover, in conversations with Mrs. Mills, Anne hints mysteriously at an incident not long ago – ‘that day’ – when her mother ‘went mad’ (10:35–10:53, 13:42, 1:08:27). As Grace herself begins to hear noises coming from empty rooms, she suspects that the spirits of the former owners haunt the house. Since they seem to be opening the doors and window-shutters letting in the light, Grace feels that the ‘intruders’ pose a threat to Anne’s and Nicholas’ wellbeing. It becomes evident though that the servants, who claim to be very honest (05:07, 05:11), talk behind Grace’s back, and Mrs. Mills in particular seems to withhold information that might explain the supernatural phenomena.<sup>12</sup> Her ambivalent statements also make the viewers suspect that the servants are somehow in league with the intruders.<sup>13</sup>

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- 10 The film poster of the horror thriller *Stonehearst Asylum* (2014) shows a similarly symbolic reflection.
  - 11 Concerning Grace’s responsibility for two young children and her disputed madness, she bears a strong resemblance to the governess in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), one of the literary classics of unreliable narration.
  - 12 After Grace has asked Mr. Tuttle to look for a little cemetery in the garden and to check whether a family and their son Victor were buried there, Mrs. Mills and Mr. Tuttle cover up some gravestones in the garden (50:53–51:28). Following an argument between Grace and Anne concerning the intruders, Mrs. Mills comforts Anne by saying that she ‘can see them’ too. She however reclines from telling Grace about it, because “[t]here are things that your mother doesn’t want to hear. She only believes in what she was taught. But don’t worry, sooner or later she’ll see. Then everything will be different. [...] There are going to be some big surprises. There are going to be... changes” (59:00–59:29).
  - 13 When Mrs. Mills talks to Mr. Tuttle about Grace and her children she concludes that “[t]he children will be easier to convince. It’s the mother who’s going to cause us problems” (59:49–59:57). In conversation with Grace after a particularly traumatic fight between Anne and Grace, Mrs. Mills mysteriously replies, “[y]ou can’t take on all responsibility of this house. Leave it to us. We know what has to be done” (1:05:34–1:05:44).

As it turns out, Anne and Mrs. Mills who seem to tell Grace less about the intruders than they really know are more trustworthy than Grace, whose words actually contradict her actions.<sup>14</sup> Still, the narrative mediation is closely connected to Grace's perspective. The film opens with Grace's voice-over. She is about to tell a bedtime story, which is followed by the presentation of a number of chiaroscuro woodcuts that in fact foreshadow the narrative without giving away its twist. Quite contrary to Grace's voice-over's implication to tell a good night story, her introductory close up is an oblique angle showing her to be screaming (fig. 6). She is lying in bed in broad daylight which suggests that she just woke up from a nightmare which also goes to show that she is a troubled character. Although the initial voice-over suggests that the upcoming story is an embedded narrative, this is a narrative ploy to make the viewers believe that Grace is first and fore-mostly a caring mother, who tells comforting stories to her children, and, moreover, that she is basically a flesh and blood character.

The film's cinematography makes effective use of strong contrasts of light referring to the dramatic composition of chiaroscuro to create a gloomy and eerie atmosphere as well as to visualise the story's aim of uncovering the truth. The children's photosensitivity is symptomatic for their groping in the dark as regards their actual death. In this context, the term light is synonymous with truth<sup>15</sup> (09:22–09:49, 11:14–12:55, 1:14:45–1:15:58). In the story, Grace eventually has to face the fact that she herself has brought on the horror to her family. As the unexplained phenomena in the house grow more threatening, she loads her rifle and evicts the servants. After Anne and Nicholas have climbed from their window and discovered the graveyard, where the servants' bodies are buried, they are stalked by the servants and run back upstairs where they come upon the intruders, gathered in a séance. When Grace enters the room, Anne and Nicholas converse with the medium, a blind old woman, who asks about their former death in this room. The film at this point shows the objective viewpoint of the intruders which supports the fact that throughout the story two parallel worlds existed in the house. The alleged intruders turn out to be the new house owners, Victor's family, who found out that the house is haunted by its former inhabitants,

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14 Grace reassures her children "that nothing is going to happen to you while mommy is here" (35:21), despite the fact that she not only killed them but is very hard on Anne whom she also physically attacks.

15 See for instance Grace's replies "[t]hey [the children] must never be exposed to any light [...]. It would eventually be fatal" (09:36–09:47) and "[t]his house is like a ship. The light must be contained as if it were water by opening and closing the doors. My children's lives are at stake" (22:27–22:36).

a mother who had smothered her children and shot herself. In the aftermath of this revelation, Mrs. Mills comforts Grace, who eventually remembers her gruesome deed, and explains that the world of the living and the dead usually do not intermingle, but sometimes, as in this house, ghosts and humans can sense one another. Having accepted their death and no longer being plagued by illness, the children are shown to play in daylight, whilst Grace vows never to leave the house. As Grace is a ghost bound to her former home, her radius of movement is restricted. As can be seen in the story, she is deterred by a dense fog when she tries to leave the grounds.

Although all the main characters in *The Others* have passed away, the story stresses only the trauma symptoms of some of them. After Grace’s initial fear that the alleged spirits of the former house owners might harm her children, she retreats into denial about the intruders. Being not yet able to face her death, Grace is constantly trying to deny the truth. In case of the intruders, she eventually tries in vain to pretend that they do not exist. She also blocks out the horrifying memories of ‘that day’ when she had killed her two children before committing suicide, and since then Grace only sees what she wants to see. In this context, her migraine which seems to get severe whenever she comes across the intruders or has to confront the truth implies that her subconscious is close to retrieving her repressed memories (29:25–29:42). Regarding Grace’s husband, who returns from the war but is rather lethargic, and after a very short time, is simply gone, Grace observes that he is ‘so different’ to which he replies, “sometimes I bleed” (54:22). His subsequent ineloquence and depressed manner as well as his sudden disappearance imply that he has yet to understand that he died in the war. As a result of her death, Lydia too has become ‘speechless’. After Grace asks Mrs. Mills why and when Lydia became mute, Mrs. Mills vaguely apologises and says that her “memory is a bit rusty these days” (42:12), which suggests that she, like Malcolm in *The Sixth Sense*, has lost track of time after she died. When Mrs. Mills replies that Lydia just stopped talking one day, Grace concludes: “But there must have been a reason. People don’t just stop talking. These things are always the result of some sort of trauma. Something must have happened to her” (42:26–42:38). As Grace herself will come to understand, the repressed memory of her own death as well as her inability to be specific about the duration of events in the story are also symptomatic of her individual trauma.

Although the house is usually a safe place for its inhabitants, in *The Others* its symbolic maternal attributes are inverted. With its covered windows, different levels and locked rooms, the house in *The Others* represents Grace’s personality. Taking into consideration that the different rooms of the house correspond to

Grace's experiences and memories, the doors represent the entrances into her unconscious. In this context, whenever she enters the 'upper room', the children's bedchamber, in which the intruders eventually hold the séance that triggers Grace's personal revelation of having smothered her children in their bed, she is emotionally unstable or even violent (on one occasion she almost chokes Anne to death). Her intense mood swings imply that she blocks out the conscious awareness of having murdered Anne and Nicholas in that room, so that the painful memories would not have to be experienced. Grace is not only said to have become mad but by having killed her children actually proves it. The image of the nurturing mother, which Grace believes in and tries to put up throughout the story, is turned upside down. Considering her motive, Liebrand (2003, 223) argues that only the mother who kills her own children (and herself) prevents them from growing old. In this respect, the frequently shown dead tree in the backyard (24:14, 27:45, 59:35, 1:21:07–1:21:18, 1:22:52) indicates that this house does not bring forth any new life.

## Conclusion

*The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* utilise classical features of gothic fiction. As children have long been believed to be better at seeing ghosts than adults, both films feature children that act as an intermediary between the ghosts and the living. Moreover, both stories contain poltergeists (in *The Sixth Sense*, Cole is physically harmed by some of the spirits, while Grace in *The Others* moves the table during the séance), and the filmic ghost story convention that the spirits of the dead can be made perceptible when recorded on some storage device, as for instance in *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Paranormal Activity* (2007), *The Awakening* (2011). In *The Sixth Sense*, Cole's mother detects 'otherworldly flashes of light' in the photographs that show Cole, while Malcolm is able to hear the voice of a ghost listening to a taped session with Vincent. In contrast, *The Others* makes use of post-mortem photography to reveal the truth about the death of the servants. Both films can be considered the ultimate audiovisual exhibit of capturing the images of the dead.

The turn-of-the-millennium films *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others* differ from other waves of the horror genre, for instance the psycho killers of the 1960s, or the slashers of the 1970s. Both films show how the individual tries to cope with existential changes, and they present topics like mortality, loss and fear of life to a large audience. For the viewers, the final plot twist reveals that the main characters have been ghosts throughout the story. For the ghost-protagonists, however, the discovery and recognition of their altered state of existence is actually therapeutic. The films show that the narrative agency, the viewpoint of the ghost-protagonists,

is a source of constant dissonance as long as the characters have not accepted that they have passed away. Once they come to terms with their traumatic experience of having died, the inner and outer conflicts in the story are resolved. In order to do that, the protagonists have to acknowledge that their fundamental, existential, and in Grace’s case normative, world view is wrong. One reason for the proliferation of ‘they-don’t-know-they’re-ghosts’ stories in the early twenty-first century is highlighted by Newman who argues that they pick up societies’ unease, because “[i]n the air is a notion, fostered by global trauma, that we’re dead already, or might as well be for all our chances of pulling through” (2011, 454).

Arguably, early horror films like *Carnival of Souls* basically rely on the surprise of the last-reel revelation. Critically acclaimed and financially successful horror films like *The Sixth Sense* and *The Others*<sup>16</sup>, on the other hand, pay close attention to complex storytelling and narrative consistency. Although they aim for artistically cheating their audience, they present ambivalent dialogues, reactions, and scenes that stand multiple viewings.

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16 According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), *The Sixth Sense* had a production budget of approximately \$40 million and earned a worldwide gross of \$672 million, whereas *The Others* cost \$17 million and grossed \$209 million worldwide.

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