“Something ancient in modern times”

Myth and Meaning-Making in M. Night Shyamalan’s *Lady in the Water*

Nicholas Parker and Nirmal Trivedi

Numerous critics have complained since its recent release that *Lady in the Water* (2006) is a profoundly frustrating text. Culminating in a Razzie for worst director and worst supporting actor for M. Night Shyamalan in February 2007, critique of the film has been vehement to the point of being vicious. Michael Phillips in the *Chicago Tribune* complains that “just when the story begs for some clean lines and a sense of direction, we get dithering and misdirection and another confused-tenants sequence.” Peter Travers’s *Rolling Stone* review argues that “the movie is a muddle, burdened with too many characters and a sorry lack of thrills, flair and coherence.” The film “doesn’t make a drop of sense” (Westhoff). Its producer has “lost his creative marbles” (Dargis). Details like the result of a Google search on the name of the film’s monsters are cited by Michael Atkinson of *The Village Voice* as another critique of the film: “What scrutin musters up when Googled is proof as well that Shyamalan don’t surf.” Even the depiction of the men living in one of the apartments reveals for one critic that “Shyamalan has obviously never, ever been stoned.” Both larger and smaller publications seem to share in this kind of inflammatory judgment, sometimes of the text but more often of its director, using the film as a launching pad for wide-ranging and largely tangential commentary.
Why critics should be quite so animated is worth some exploration. Shyamalan and his text, it seems, provoke some anxiety that must be invidiously put down. Lisa Schwarzbaum reveals this anxiety as an uneasy coexistence of rational thought with what we will argue is myth. Writing in *Entertainment Weekly*, she is not far from the truth in pointing out that *Lady in the Water* has an “unease as a cohesive piece.” There is an implication that this discomfort is something to be avoided—that coherence is a primary concern. Why should there be this inference in her criticism? Could we not argue then that the “unease” that Schwarzbaum cites is not the film’s but her own? The assumption of coherence is at the crux of much of the criticism; however, we will assert that the possibility of such coherence itself is in fact a central theme of the film. Ultimately, our argument is that *Lady in the Water* is about reading and the possibility of doing so coherently even if this possibility is never fulfilled. The film toys with the notion of coherence, resulting in a resistant text that forces “readers” to work hard to come to terms with it.

The intricacies that surround the diegesis of *Lady in the Water* are, as Travers and others have indicated, convoluted. The film surrounds a condominium complex in Philadelphia managed by Cleveland Heep (Paul Giamatti), and replete with a variety of idiosyncratic residents. Cleveland discovers a water nymph called Story (Bryce Dallas Howard) living in the complex’s pool. Story needs to find a hitherto unknown “vessel” among the residents, a writer who will have a profound influence on the world in the future, with whom she can commune before returning home to the ocean. There is also the threat of a creature called a scrunt who hunts Story. Other residents potentially can take on protective roles of various kinds to ensure Story’s safe passage home.

The critical consensus appears to be that the process of inscription and reinscription of roles in the narrative is confusing and unnecessary. Phillips sums up this point of view when he argues that “determining the identities of the guardian and the guild takes up an ill-advised amount of screen time.” To do some disservice to the spirit but not the letter of one reviewer’s comments, it is true that “at times it seems cast members are making up the story as they go” (Vice). This anxiety about incoherence does not seem manifest in critical responses to other directors, most notably in the assessment of David Lynch, whose popularity is well established. While both directors produce experimental narratives, Lynch’s audience carries a very different set of expectations than Shyamalan’s about narrative ambiguity. Lynch remains firmly positioned within art-house conventions. In contrast, Shyamalan makes Hollywood films; he employs mainstream stars, spends many times Lynch’s budgets, and works within