In 2006, M. Night Shyamalan became one of numerous celebrities to participate in the American Express “My life. My card” campaign. The print version of his advertisement contains a photo of the director and a list of his responses to implied questions, one of which reveals that his proudest moment is when he sees his “children overcome fear.” Yet the ad itself suggests a different attitude about the relationship between parents and children. The photo shows Shyamalan sitting at the foot of the bed of a little girl, an open picture book in his hand. He stares boldly at the camera while, at the far end of the bed, the child cowers in terror, the blanket pulled up to her eyes, keeping a watchful eye on the filmmaker. 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.

Shyamalan’s films prompt a series of questions about families: Why is it that so many of Shyamalan’s cinematic families are missing a parent? Why is it that the surviving parents are so weirdly isolated, and sometimes just plain weird? Why is it that the relationship between adults and children are depicted as so tense and impenetrable? It is my contention that Shyamalan deliberately develops a parallel between the supernatural and the fraught relationship between parent and child. That is, unlike the traditional Victorian ghost story, which uses the supernatural event as a bridge between past and present to speak to the effect that our history
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has on us, Shyamalan suggests instead—by using both traditional supernatural tropes such as ghosts and more recent pop-cultural ones such as aliens—that the supernatural is not a means to confront our past at all, but is instead a way of explaining the gaps between the living. In his films, the space between parent and child is depicted as a supernatural space rather than a liminal one. The filmmaker hints that the gap between adult and child is not occupied by a transitional space that the child will ultimately cross through to become an adult, but rather is an unbridgeable space more akin to that which separates the ghost from the living person: each may see the other, but ultimately neither entity fully occupies the space of the other’s world.

Shyamalan thus works in the tradition of the etymologically obsessed Freud who analyzes the word _unheimlich_ in his essay “The Uncanny.” Whether consciously or not, the filmmaker, too, seems aware of the multivalence of the word in which there is a tension between what _home_ should be, the center of family life, and that which is _not-of-the-home_ (alternatively translated as “eerie” or “uncanny”) (Freud 124). In Shyamalan’s case, homes and families provide more than the narrative focus for his supernatural tales; they _are_ the supernatural tale.

One of the purposes of this essay, then, is to examine the depiction of families in Shyamalan’s movies in relation to Vivian Sobchak’s argument in “Child/Alien/Father: Patriarchal Crisis and Generic Exchange,” which posits that the figure of the child in horror movies incorporates “cultural difference, social transformation, and historical movement into a single and powerful figure” (7). Sobchak is interested in the “cultural meanings that the figure of the child narrativizes” in contemporary horror, science fiction, and family melodrama films, arguing that these meanings, which are different in each genre, are linked to the “crisis experienced by American bourgeois patriarchy since the late 1960s, and the related disintegration and transfiguration of the ‘traditional’ American bourgeois family” (7–8). Shyamalan’s films, which straddle the horror and science fiction genres, can be seen as both contending with and extending Sobchak’s theories, but what I want to argue here is that it is not the figure of the child who reflects cultural meaning in his films as much as it is the _relationship_ between child and adult that does. Moreover, the cultural anxiety that these relationships reflect is significantly changed from the anxiety over a threatened patriarchy that Sobchak theorized twenty years ago.

Sobchak in her study notes how horror and science fiction films have reimagined both the “time and place of horror and anxiety,” as well as the source of that horror and anxiety, as issuing from the American home, and cites as examples films such as _The Exorcist_ (1973), _The Amityville_