Reshaping the Director as Star

Investigating M. Night Shyamalan’s Image

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In the week before his fifth feature film was released, a picture of director, producer, and screenwriter M. Night Shyamalan filled the cover of the August 5, 2002 edition of Newsweek. Next to the image, the magazine claimed Shyamalan to be “The Next Spielberg” and suggested he was “Hollywood’s Hottest New Storyteller.” Editor-in-chief Mark Whitaker discussed the unusual choice of Shyamalan for the cover in his weekly column, suggesting that the potential of the young director earned him both this comparison to Spielberg and the extensive press coverage he received by the magazine. In defending the choice of Shyamalan on the cover, Whitaker claimed:

We don’t do “Hollywood covers” very often, and we don’t always get them right. In retrospect, we’ve done some that were pretty silly. (“Can a Movie Help Make a President?” was our line for the 1983 astronaut epic, The Right Stuff. Within months the candidate in question, John Glenn, withdrew from the race.) We’ve also lived to regret putting a movie our reviewers didn’t like on the cover because we thought it would have big box-office—and newsstand—sales. (Remember Pearl Harbor [2001]? Disappointing on both counts.) But we’ve done many show-business covers we’re proud of, and they usually have one of two things going for them. They tap into meaty social, political or historical debates (JFK [1991], Saving Private Ryan [1998], Malcolm X [1992]). Or they introduce our readers to an actor or director who is particularly promising—well ahead of the media pack. (4)
Unlike most of the show business covers Whitaker describes, which center more on films that were some form of expected cultural phenomena, this particular cover prominently featured the image of the director—not images from the film itself or the actors. It foregrounded Shyamalan as a “star” director, one deserving of such public attention.

Certainly Shyamalan was not the first director to emerge as a star or to receive such treatment. Alfred Hitchcock successfully transmitted his image across multiple media fifty years ago. Francis Ford Coppola’s exploits in his early filmmaking career were legendary to the public throughout much of the 1970s, including through a satirical sketch of his runaway production, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), on *Saturday Night Live* in 1979. But what is particularly interesting about Shyamalan being positioned as a star director in 2002 is how he uniquely captured the tension operating between two poles in American filmmaking at the time. On the one hand, his mainstream success underscored the primacy of the studio system, with its heavy marketing machinery and reliance on box office receipts. On the other hand, his original screenplays based on character-driven drama put his filmmaking more in line with those working outside the system—or, within those studios considered more “independent” or independent friendly, such as Miramax—and who were deemed art-house directors.

Shyamalan’s early image negotiated these conflicting tendencies of seeing the star as artist and the star as laborer. Most star studies have focused on the images of film actors and actresses as the site of this conflict, and have stopped short of investigating other kinds of film stars. In the first part of this essay, I will consider how star studies can help explore the different aspects of the director’s role in the production process in terms of this conflict. Next, I will examine the discourse surrounding Shyamalan as a star director in the popular and Hollywood press during his early career and discuss how Shyamalan uniquely managed the divide. Finally, I will look specifically at the marketing of his films and how, through them, Shyamalan’s image consolidated the two divisions. I argue that the image of the director as star is a contradiction between competing discourses of what constitutes artistic filmmaking and what constitutes mainstream filmmaking. M. Night Shyamalan’s image as a star director not only defined him as part of the mainstream Hollywood machinery but also defined him as working against it. The ability of Shyamalan’s image to mediate these conflicts ultimately defines the limited terms available for director stardom within the contemporary filmmaking landscape.