

Like *The Sixth Sense*, *The Others* works because even though subtle clues are given throughout the film which indicate that the main characters, whom the audience naturally assumes to be alive, are actually merely spirits which interact with the living characters who populate the purgatorial world to which they are confined. However, Amenabar does not allow his fiction to degenerate into predictable Hollywoodization, as Shyamalan's directorial debut did (it turns out that Willis and Osment have a "task" to perform, and they help to solve the murder of a teenage girl who lives on the other side of Philadelphia). At the end of *The Others*, we are simply left with ghosts who refuse to leave the place which they called home when they were living creatures, as the three huddle in a hallway and repeat ad nauseum, "this house is ours." As the movie ends, the camera pans away from the three and the point of view becomes that of the house. The faint whispers of "this house is ours" echo throughout the mansion.

The brilliance of Amenabar's ghost story is that it is a film about how haunted houses are born, more than it is a film about a haunted house. In other words, *The Others* ends where the typical haunted house movie begins, with spirits laying claim to property and refusing to share this abode with any of the living.

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the same sense that an M. R. James or Oliver Onions tale is spooky. Some may find that it takes Amenabar too long to build the story towards its revelation, and that the final payoff is not as effective as it should be. In fact, the showing that I saw ended with a group of college aged boys standing up and "booing," apparently disappointed with the lack of creatively gruesome deaths and what they considered the lack of ghosts. This is particularly interesting because we find out at the end of the film that all along all the characters we have been watching are indeed ghosts, but these undead spirits are unlike the ghosts Americans have been trained to expect in Hollywood movies, so they are unrecognizable to most.

If there is a weakness to Amenabar's fine film, it is in the fact that *The Others* follows in the footsteps of *The Sixth Sense*, so its climactic scene does not come as complete a surprise to sophisticated moviegoers as it could have otherwise. In fact, the plot is simple and not especially innovative (in essence, *The Others* is your average ghost story, with the slight twist being the ghosts are telling the story), but strong acting and atmosphere keep it from becoming run-of-the-mill. Nicole Kidman is brilliant as Grace, a beautiful young widowed mother who must raise her two children, Anne (Alakina Mann) and Nicholas (James Bentley), alone in their isolated British island mansion, sometime near the end of World War II. The first indication given to the audience that something is amiss occurs when a trio of overly friendly caretakers arrives one day. Mrs. Mills (Fionnula Flanagan), Lydia (Elaine Cassidy), and Mr. Tuttle (Eric Sykes) suddenly show up at the mansion door, despite the fact that Grace had yet to post the ad for servants. The three claim to know of Grace's need for servants through the grapevine, and in a further touch of subtle eeriness, one of the servants who is hired on the spot comments about knowing the mansion well. This goes unnoticed by Grace, who we later discover is in complete denial concerning the true reality of her ghostly existence.

To keep herself from facing facts, Grace concentrates all her energies on her children, who we are told have a deadly allergy to light. Anna and Nicholas are portrayed brilliantly by Mann and Bentley, in very demanding roles that require a range of emotions rather than the top cuteness usually asked of child actors. If anything, their performances are reminiscent of Haley Joel Osment's in *The Sixth Sense*. Mann and Bentley show some fine chemistry on screen, particularly in the scenes where the two react differently to the visitations by a child ghost.

The gist of the plot line of *The Others* is that Grace and her two children seemingly suffer non-corporeal visitations from various members of an unseen family. Diverse noises--namely crying, piano music, and running up and down the stairs--are intermittently heard by Grace and Anne in various scenes. And as the heavy curtains which had been hung by Grace to stop light from entering the house begin opening and closing by themselves, the audience also begins to suspect that there are indeed ghosts in the mansion. Grace's slow process of realization that the realms of the living and the dead have met in her home comes to a head in the final surprising ten minutes of the film, when she discovers that she and her children have been deceased for decades. Granted, this very interesting twist does take nearly the entire length of *The Others* to be sprung on the unsuspecting audience, and some moviegoers will find themselves wishing that something would just hurry up and happen about midway through the film. Yet when the film's surprise ending does occur, it is satisfying, even to a Hollywood raised American audience (which, let's face it, will not have the same taste for subtlety as would a British audience).

Witnessing the Birth of a Haunted House: A Review of Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others*

by Tony Fonseca

Having grown up on a steady diet of Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery*, I have been delighted as of late to see such filmmakers as M. Night Shyamalan and Tarsem Singh, who in *The Sixth Sense*, *Unbreakable*, and *The Cell* have resurrected the idea of horror producing not only shock but also a sense of unease, the same idea that the Pulitzer prize winning writer of *Requiem for a Heavyweight* had introduced to American pop culture back in the 1960s and 70s. Serling's subtle, ironic horror was different from the contemporary "monster eat world" horror seen in the theaters and on television. In my favorite Serling story called "Make Me Laugh," a failed comedian named Jackie strikes a deal with the urban version of a genie and wishes for the ability to make people laugh. Of course, in the gothic imagination, every blessing is a curse in disguise, and Jackie finds that people laugh at everything he says. Desperate to be taken seriously after just a few days, Jackie finds the same genie and demands that he be given a new wish, that people no longer laugh when he talks to them. Again, the wish/curse is granted, and as Jackie crosses the street to tell a joke to a stranger, he is hit by a car. The final lines of the story are that "nobody was laughing." What Serling understood is that horror need not always be gratuitously gory or even suspenseful; it could be simply the result of a thoughtful reexamination of the everyday reality humans take for granted.

Likewise, these films challenge the idea of current horror, going against the grain of predictable blockbuster movies like *Blair Witch 2*, *Along Came a Spider* and *Jeepers Creepers*, as these writers/directors introduce audiences to psychological realms they have yet to visit, to worlds where the laws of reality as we understand them are subtly refracted through a slightly twisted psyche. They create worlds of the walking dead who are ignorant of their own changed condition, worlds of the deranged psychopathic mind, where tortuous dreams cannot be separated from reality, and where the adult serial killer and the innocent child who was transformed into that killer can co-exist and even interact. With his "ghost story" *The Others*, writer/director Alejandro Amenabar joins the ranks of Shyamalan and Singh, producing an atmospheric tale that flies in the face of the typical ghost story movie like *The Haunting* (the 1999 version, not the 1963 version), to which it is often compared, because there are no hideous deaths, no body counts, and only a minimal number of grotesque or gory scenes.

If *The Others* is suspenseful, it is only in the same sense that a Tony Hillerman or Joe R. Lansdale pseudo-supernatural detective novel is suspenseful--both the protagonists in the fictional text and the readers (or in this case, the audience) want desperately to find out what is going on. In fact, in *The Others* there is not even a pretense of concern with blood and gore, with teenagers getting naked and being punished for sexual indiscretions, with death for death's (and torture's) sake, or with scaring the audience by keeping it on the edge of its collective seat. Rather the film is classically gothic: atmospheric, eerie, disquieting; to put it bluntly, spooky, in