

An analysis of mise-en-scene and long takes in  
**M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable***

- a distinctive use of film style in the work of a contemporary auteur -



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## Abstract

Films are a form of art. And though they share several aspects with other art forms, e.g. painting, photography, and literature, films are not a mere composite of these. Films are unique in the way they are structured and composed and have a totally different appeal than the other arts. Films have the ability to show development in time *and* space at the same time. The structural elements, the language if you will, that filmmakers use in order to represent time and space in films are many, and the combination of them is practically limitless. The structural elements, what is also called the elements of style, make up the basic structure of films and are therefore at the very centre of the art form. It is through the combination and manipulation of these elements that filmmakers express content; the story of the films comes to life through the control of the elements of the images and sounds. The film style that is most widespread in today's films is called the classical continuity system - the roots of which reach as far back as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While it was founded in American cinema the classical continuity system is seen in virtually any film today. An understanding of the actual elements of style that make up the most used structural templates of classical continuity is important in any understanding and reading of film. It is through the reading of the style of a film, whether it is conscious or not, that much meaning is constructed as the audience make sense of the images and sounds that make up the film.

In this thesis I have focussed on two stylistic elements and their connection to how a central theme in a film is represented. I have looked at the use of mise-en-scene and long takes in M. Night Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* from 2000, and how the theme of hero and villain is represented through the use of the two elements of filmic language. Long takes are shots that are lengthy compared to other takes, enabling the audience to delve on the little details of the scene. Mise-en-scene refers to the actual composition of the elements within the image. Though these are two separate elements of filmic style they are highly interconnected; the more detailed and careful the staging and composition of the mise-en-scene is, the more time – the longer takes - the audience need in order to appreciate and take in all the information. In *Unbreakable* mise-en-scene and long takes are used in moments that play a vital role in the unfolding of the story as well as making several underlying messages more salient. What is really only apparent at the very end of the story, is hinted at and shown through symbols, colours, and pictorial information in the film throughout. Shyamalan manages to let the real story of the film shine through in the use of long takes and mise-en-scene, but not only that, Shyamalan creates a film that stylistically sets itself apart from other contemporary films.

In Shyamalan's other films we find the same preference for long takes and mise-en-scene. Though his other films are not looked at in great detail here, they still show a director keen on using a certain style to represent his themes – a particular type of language in which to tell his stories. As is the case in *Unbreakable*, the two elements of film style analysed are used at key moments in the unfolding of the stories in the films, and the long takes influence the looks of the films in general. In all of his films Shyamalan uses long takes to a great extent – something that is not only obvious when watching them, but also apparent when compared to other films of contemporary Hollywood. For example, the total number of shots in Shyamalan's *Unbreakable* makes up only 10% of the total number of shots in several other contemporary Hollywood films. It is as if Shyamalan has found a personal style of preferred structural elements and therefore succeeds in making his films his own. His films become personal, through their characteristic look and way of dealing with their respectable stories. His films work as a unified body of art, all related in style and themes. The individuality of the whole of his works is strengthened by the fact that Shyamalan functions as the writer, director, and – to some extent - producer of all of his films. They are the products of his artistic merits.

Film criticism has long worked with a term that encompasses such artistic individuality, namely the term of an auteur. An auteur is seen as a filmmaker who manages to pull an artistic and personal view over all of his or her films, and therefore it is my claim that the creative control can be attributed to Shyamalan in *Unbreakable*, and in his other films. His films can be looked upon as a whole, all sharing several themes, ways of dealing with the themes, and stylistic elements – all of which is a sign of Shyamalan's personality. And even if the actual term 'auteur' has evolved to not just include the director, but anyone who brings (artistic) value to a film, it is my claim that M. Night Shyamalan is an artist. It is his personal and artistic choices that make up the heart on his films. He is a contemporary auteur.

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