

And that's because I don't see too many 2s

Written by M. Night Shyamalan

Directed by M. Night Shyamalan

Mark Wahlberg ... Elliot Moore

Zoey Deschanel ... Alma Moore

John Leguizamo ... Julian

Ashlyn Sanchez ... Jess

Betty Buckley ... Mrs. Jones

Spencer Breslin ... Josh

Principal: [to concerned teachers] Alright, there appears to be an event happening. Central Park was just hit by what seems to be a terrorist attack. They're not clear on the scale yet. It's some kind of airborne chemical toxin that's been released in and around the park. They said to watch for warning signs. The first stage is confused speech. The second stage is physical disorientation, loss of direction. The third stage...is fatal.

Most of the movies I review I enjoy and recommend to the attention of others. Occasionally, I'll go slumming and to try to gather page visits from the masses... e.g. RV, Talladega Nights, Fool's Gold, and a few others—actually these all have some redeeming critical qualities IMHO. But I'm going to go out on a limb and state that of the popular movies I've seen, except for the absolutely atrocious Mars Attacks, this latest effort from M. Night Shyamalan should either a) not have gotten off the cutting floor or b) the metaphor is so esoteric and deep that my modest intellect cannot fathom it.

Like M. Night's popular Sixth Sense with Bruce Willis and Signs with Mel Gibson, I assumed that The Happening would be a movie that was difficult to discuss without giving away an important revelation that gives meaning to the story and people's bizarre behavior. In the case of the two former movies, we saw that the thoughts of the protagonist(s) were all a big, beautiful, though troubling, metaphor for the reality of things. I enjoyed Sixth Sense and Signs for that reason. The viewer stumbles along saying, "Okay, that seems a little puzzling there, but this is science fiction, so I'll suspend disbelief." Until in the final few scenes the author gives you the final piece of the puzzle, and it's "Aha!"

So I'm watching The Happening with all due diligence, as bizarre stuff just cascades seemingly out of control, and the lead characters—the Moores (Mark Wahlberg and Zoey Deschanel) seem to be the protagonists here—act rationally one minute then inexplicably the next. Until finally the movie ends, and I'm still waiting for the Big Metaphor that strings it all together... and waiting, and waiting. I speculate that perhaps Elliot Moore's friend Julian (John Leguizamo) has a terminal illness—wasn't that mentioned somewhere?—and a parallel exists in the progress of his disease with "the happening."

The quote I started with above gives you the idea on just what is going on. The key sentence in the description is about the third stage. Wherever the happening strikes, people wind up committing suicide... in unique, imaginative ways. More on that later. The event has the characteristics of an airborne poisoning, "something in the wind" that simply causes people to turn into zombies and self-destruct. The "incidents" start in New York Central Park, and somehow the mainstream media just know the afflicted communities are all in the Northeast United States.

Elliot is a high school science teacher in Philadelphia and we meet him discussing the sudden disappearance of the honey bees:

Elliot Moore: Come on, buddy. Take an interest in science. What could be the reason bees have vanished?

Student: An act of nature, and we'll never fully understand it.

Elliot Moore: Nice answer. He's right. Science will come up with some reason to put in the books, but in the end it'll be just a theory. I mean, we will fail to acknowledge that there are forces at work beyond our understanding. To be a scientist, you must have a respectful awe for the laws of nature.

Shortly after this scene, Elliot and Alma and Julian and Julian's daughter Jess (Ashlyn Sanchez) learn about the deal in New York and are on the road. Well, they start out on a train, then when the train stops (for no good reason), they try hitch rides, then they have to split up, and I shouldn't give this away but Julian gets infected and comes to a bad end, he bequeaths his daughter to the Moores, who carry on and meet up with diverse groups of others in the Pennsylvania countryside, etc. At some point Elliot, science teacher that he is and after connecting with a nursery owner and wife, comes to the conclusion that the trees are possibly the cause of the happening(s).

Nursery Owner: You know plants have the ability to target specific threats. Tobacco plants when attacked by heliothis caterpillars will send out a chemical attracting wasps to kill just those caterpillars. We don't know how plants obtain these abilities, they just evolve very rapidly.

Alma Moore: Which species is doing it if you think it's true?

Nursery Owner: Plants have the ability to communicate with other species of plants. Trees can communicate with bushes, and bushes with grass, and everything in between.

So what we have here is a new twist on the Day of the Triffids (or the Eggplant that Ate Chicago) only more insidious, unseen, and unpredictable. The rest of the movie has the Moores and their young charge, picking up a couple of boys along the way, trying to survive by trudging through farm land. We learn, too, that Elliot and Alma are having marital difficulties, which is suggested by lines that you'll just have to hear to believe:

Elliot Moore: [Alma looks troubled] What's wrong?

Alma Moore: Okay, I was going to tell you, okay? There was this guy Joey. His name is Joey; he's at work. We went out and we had dessert; I went out and had dessert with him when I told you I worked late and I didn't work late and I'm feeling really guilty in case we're gonna die. I just wanted you to know that.

Elliot Moore: You...lied to me?

To get back at Alma, Elliot makes up a story that he bought some expensive cough syrup just so he could see this pharmacist lady that was so attractive. Then he admits he made it up, and Alma thanks him. At which point they seem to reconcile. All the while the main characters are engaging in various degrees of infantile dialog, other people are shown doing themselves in. My favorite is the guy who pulls his car to the side of the road, then climbs on one of those commercial highway-shoulder tractor mowers, starts it, sets it to go around in circles, climbs off, and lays down in front of it. Ouch!

Most of the dialog is simply strange and slow, stilted in a way. People are dying right and left, but not our smart little nucleus of chosen ones. Then the Happening moves on, and we're back in Phillie sending Jess to school. If the movie had a plot I might be accused of giving it away. I still hold out the possibility that there's some symbolism or metaphors I missed; the movie is so odd, that I found it kind of entertaining in an offbeat way. Which is why I give it a 3. Kind of gory, but what will scare the children is the absence of meaning in the writing. M. Night may be smoking too much ropey dopey.

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2008 November 27

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