

Trap: The Staggering Mediocrity of Directorial Privilege

by Fionn O'Neill

How good does a movie have to be to earn \$80 million? It's an absurd amount of money, on its own, but in the language of Hollywood profits: how much success does it represent?

The metrics that major film executives use to measure success will tell you that it depends on the movie's budget, specifically in comparison to how much it makes in theaters. This means that if a movie grosses more than it cost to make: it's seen as a success; if it makes double its production's budget? Box-office blowout.

If we're to follow this line of thinking, then M. Night Shyamalan's "*Trap*," should be viewed as a unilateral triumph of filmmaking. In August of last year, the movie was released in theaters across the United States. It took a reported \$30 million (Deadline) to produce the movie. Over the duration of its box-office run, it made a little over \$80 million, worldwide.

That being a profit of \$50 million, it'd be reasonable to conclude (especially given our previously-established metrics of success), that *Trap* is a "good" movie; the thought-process isn't inscrutable. If a film is well-made, more people will want to watch it, ergo: higher earnings.

The problem with this logic is that it doesn't take into account the material quality of the actual film itself. With any amount of context, moviegoers will still have a blurred perception of

the film they're going to theaters to see; they won't *really* know the depth of what they're paying for, until they watch it.

If consumers can't base their ticket purchase off of a film's merit, then—how do they decide which movies to see? Well, if you don't know anything about how good a movie actually is, at the very least, you can go off of who made it...

“Directed By M. Night Shyamalan”

One of the very first things you will hear about *Trap*, is that it was directed by M. Night Shyamalan. It isn't out of the ordinary, of course, for most movies to be synonymous with the name of their director. The difference is, however, that *Trap* being directed by M. Night Shyamalan is about the *only* thing that you'll hear about it.

Shyamalan's first major directorial success came with the film: *The Sixth Sense*. It was released in 1999 to critical acclaim (going on to even win a People's Choice Award), and is still widely regarded as his best film. The most renowned element of this movie is its twist (i.e. “I See Dead People”), which has since become a staple of almost every one of his scripts: the classic “Shyamalan Twist.”

He's been a prominent industry figure, in the many years since. With movies like *Unbreakable*, *Split*, and, *The Visit*, Shyamalan has made an undeniably successful career out of attempting to subvert audience expectations. It's a hallmark of his; he's the twist guy.

Because of this reputation, Shyamalan has been very successful in driving sales to his movies. Those that know his work will pay to see a new movie with his name attached to it, because they know that they can expect his exhilarating trademark twist.

It's a very valuable thing, to be able to sell a movie based on your name alone, and the weight that it carries. It's clear that he recognizes this value, as Shyamalan has gone through the risky habit of self-funding his own projects over the last few years. And to his credit: they tend to perform consistently well, typically earning double—sometimes even triple—the amount of their budget, internationally.

This dynamic becomes really interesting, though, when you take a look at the audience's reception to these films. For example: *Old*, released in 2021, was met with incredibly middling reviews. On RottenTomatoes, it currently sits at a score of 50%. Two years later, another Shyamalan movie, *Knock At The Cabin*, hit theaters. While it was received slightly better, with highs of 67%, it still currently sits at a median of about 50-60%.

With what appears to be two back-to-back flops, you might think that Shyamalan would've been in a bit of hot water; surely two movies that were widely considered to be nothing special would see deflated box office numbers... right? Wrong. Both movies ended up earning well-over *double* their individual budgets in theaters, internationally.

The overarching point that all of this preamble works to arrive towards, is this: there is almost no correlation between a movie's earnings, and actual viewer enjoyment. Shyamalan is

well aware of the amount of tickets that his name sells. He knows that no matter how badly-devised a movie really is—if it was made by him: people will see it. This, finally, brings us to M. Night Shyamalan’s latest film, *Trap*.

All of The Trappings of a Modern Movie

It’s time to talk about *Trap* (and after only eight-hundred words!). After its director, the second thing that you’re likely to hear about *Trap* is the elevator pitch: basically, a serial killer goes to a concert with his daughter. It turns out the concert was a sting operation; the FBI puts the place on lockdown, and the killer is “trapped,” (hence the title).

It’s a fun, interesting hook to be sure—especially in the sense that we get to follow these events from the perspective of the killer. The thing about really interesting hooks, though, is that all they really end up being are summarized, sneak-peaks of a story; a hook is *not* a plot. Unfortunately for *Trap*, the hook is all the movie has to offer. The viewer experiences the general idea within 15-20 minutes. The rest of the story is a series of tangential, disjointed, and ridiculous circumstances, in which the protagonist (undeservedly) pulls off Houdini-level tricks to evade the law.

Trap is a schlocky, aimless mess of a movie, in which none of the events make sense, the logic lacks any cohesion, and the characters speak as though their dialogue has been filtered through eight levels of AI chat-generation. All-in-all: there are almost* no redeeming qualities to *Trap*. (Note from the editor: after further elaboration: we’ve arrived at the conclusion that there are actually no redeeming qualities, full-stop.)

The thing is... If the movie is so genuinely horrible; so utterly devoid of any soul or creative drive, then why was it made in the first place? What reason, what inspiration could've compelled Shyamalan to put forth the time, effort and money required to bring this movie into the world?

I mean, think about all of the budget that went into the casting alone! Josh Hartnett, Kid Cudi, and... Selika Night Shyamalan? Interesting.

If you're wondering what the relation is there—Selika, as it turns out, is M. Night Shyamalan's very own daughter.

Inherently, there's nothing wrong with casting your loved ones—even your children—in a movie. If Sam Raimi can give his children a cameo in *Spider-Man 3*, why can't Shyamalan do the same? Well, for one: it's not just a cameo; Selika plays Lady Raven, the performer at the heart of the film's major set piece—as well as one of the most prominent characters across the movie.

The word “interesting” has been used a couple of times throughout this article, so far. In most cases, its usage has been entirely facetious, and I like to think, pleasantly condescending. With that in mind, let me tell you how *interesting* it is that Saleka Shyamalan had *no* acting experience, prior to *Trap*. I find it EQUALLY interesting that the only film productions she's ever been a part of have been her father's—specifically in their music departments. If you weren't aware, Saleka is a musical artist, a singer with multiple albums released. This is why, above

everything else, I find it **MOST INTERESTING** that nearly *every* song in *Trap* is written and performed by Saleka Shyamalan, and can be streamed on her Spotify page.

Call it a symptom of my uncharitable nature as a cynic, but you might forgive me for hypothesizing that M. Night Shyamalan made an entire movie, for the sole purpose of promoting his daughter's music. Maybe it's the fact that there's no comprehensive story, or that the entire movie revolves around her musical performance—but it appears clear to me that this film only really serves to demo Saleka Shyamalan's singing.

The Privilege of Personal Propaganda

How good does a movie have to be to earn \$80 million? The answer: it doesn't. It just has to have a name attached to it. That name gets people into seats, and money into pockets.

Whoever has that name can do whatever they want with the movie. They can make it as horrible as they want; they can put whoever, or whatever they want in it. They can even make it into an hour and 45 minute advertisement for their daughter's music. In essence: they can make *Trap*.

Promotion Plan:

This piece is supposed to read as an opinionated, online article. The publications that I'd consider trying to have it posted by would be *DiscussingFilm*, *Metacritic*, etc. I would attempt to email the editors of both of these publications with my work to see if they would have any interest in working with me to have my article published on their site/sites.

The target audience for this article would be film enjoyers—especially currently frequent theater-goers. I believe that this article appeals to a conscientious readership. Those that enjoy the critique and analysis of modern films could find enjoyment and insight from this article. Specifically: I think that people who enjoy critical video essays and commentaries on YouTube would really enjoy the way that this article is structured. If it weren't written for an online publication, I think that it would also work fairly well as a script for a long-form video.

My target SEO strategies that I used in writing this article were the implementation of a lot of key names/phrases throughout the text. I made a purposeful note to include the name of the movie as much as possible, as well as all of the important and popular figures connected to it. Because of these additions, the article will see a subsequent boost in the amount of search engine traffic it receives. I also tried to format my writing to match that of a typical online article, specifically those that review and analyze recent movies.

As far as promoting the article, I think that Twitter, BlueSky, etc., would all be very viable platforms as methods for getting more eyes on my work. Sharing my article with others through as many social media platforms as possible will be the best way to ensure that it picks up traction. I will be sure to use the requisite—and most fitting—hashtags whenever I post for an extra boost in views.

