

Retrospective Issues

The Discursive Approach to Genre and the Misdirection Film

A lot of recent films seem unsatisfied unless they can add final scenes that redefine the reality of everything that has gone before; call it the Keyser Söze syndrome.

Roger Ebert, from his review of *Fight Club*

Nothing prepared me for *Magnolia's* conclusion, and for that I am grateful . . . *Magnolia* is admittedly not for everyone, but those who “get” the film are in for something that ranks as more of a cinematic experience than a mere movie.

James Berardinelli, from his review of *Magnolia*



DURING THE STUDIO ERA, IT WAS standard for the “A” picture to be part of a program that played on a continuous loop. Consequently, viewers were unaccustomed both to getting to theaters by precise start times and to experiencing the feature film uninterrupted from beginning to end. Historically specific promotional strategies were required to market the misdirection film effectively in that context because it was not well positioned for dominant movie-going practices at the time. As

Joan Hawkins documents, to coincide with the release of *Psycho* (1960), Alfred Hitchcock virtually copied tactics from the marketing campaign for *Les diaboliques* (1955) by creating advertisements that instructed spectators to arrive before the film began and urged them not to spoil the ending (378). Thanks in part to Hitchcock's marketing ploys, exhibition practices grew more favorable for optimizing the misdirection film's narrative pleasures. It subsequently became routine for exhibitors to screen feature films at advertised start times. In spite of these new conditions, Hollywood did not back many misdirection films until the 1990s when cultural, industrial, and technological conditions all became more favorable for their production and reception. Not coincidentally, at the same time when these films exploded in popularity, the term "spoiler warning" became part of the common parlance to discourage viewers from ruining the primary pleasures associated with them in online forums or elsewhere.

This is the kind of discursive evidence that begins to demonstrate that misdirection films do, in fact, constitute a genre with a rich history that has changed over time. In this chapter, I chart the discourses associated with *Fight Club* (1999) and *Magnolia* (1999) to reveal how the particular ways in which various groups engage with misdirection films render them distinct from other Hollywood fare. *Fight Club*'s critical reputation has grown immensely since its theatrical release largely because of its complex narrative structure; however, its changeover was typically cited as a weakness initially. As a result, it was identified as a constituent of the genre immediately and suffered commercially and critically as a result of being characterized as a clear-cut misdirection film that employed the changeover unsuccessfully. *Fight Club*'s changeover, however, transformed into an asset in the post-theatrical market, vaulting it into the contemporary canon. Yet, much debate remains about the film's merits because its changeover's full significance is difficult to interpret definitively. In contrast, whereas *Magnolia* was initially received more favorably by some critics, it took some time for its status as a misdirection film to calcify because its master key first had to be unearthed and understood. This delayed discovery and reinterpretation of the film, likewise, ultimately improved its reputation. Similar to *Fight Club*, though, there is no consensus about the master key's impact on the film's gender commentary, making it challenging to determine *Magnolia*'s cultural politics. Put simply, there is still extensive disagreement about both films' takes on gender because of how the meaning of all narrative information potentially changes dramatically in light of the revelation's significance.

Drastic reconsiderations of misdirection films' cultural relevance are common, particularly in relation to markers of identity, because of both the atypical ways they are constructed and viewers interact with

them. Such deferred classifications and assessments reveal that reception can depend heavily on how these films are classified, discussed, and comprehended at distinct moments in time, suggesting why generic groupings and interpretations can enormously influence a film's reputation. The following analysis of both films, then, shows why the creation and persistence of generic classifications shape how constituent films are subsequently understood and evaluated.

Theoretical Gag Order: The Drawbacks of the Discursive Approach to Genre

While terms associated with narrative surprise, like spoiler warnings, are frequently deployed in relation to misdirection films, they are not the only kinds of media texts that inspire groups to utter them. Such alerts are perhaps now most commonly used by television viewers, especially in a digital era in which shows are increasingly watched repeatedly via timeshifting technologies and discussed zealously in virtual communities. The advent of new devices and platforms, like DVD, DVR, and social media, has played a huge role in prompting the "forensic fandom" that Jason Mittell identifies as characterizing the reception of the narratively complex fictional programming that now pervades increasingly serialized American television ("Forensic"). As the success of shows, such as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–1965) and *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964), suggests, television has perhaps always been the ideal moving-image medium for misdirection narratives since its relatively short, episodic nature usually misleads audiences for far less time during a single viewing than the standard Hollywood film. In fact, Hitchcock once memorably quipped in *TV Guide* in 1957 that the audience acts "like grown-ups when they get something for free in their own homes" but "become children again when they have to pay" (qtd. in Kapsis 38). Although television has never actually been free, the perception that audiences do not pay for it can help foster greater acceptance of narrative experimentation on the medium. As Mittell and Jonathan Gray point out in their discussion of the reception of *Lost* (2004–2010), television fans are often willing to "give themselves over to creators to be manipulated and controlled through the storytelling process" and that, contrary to conventional wisdom, spoiling does not ruin the fun, but instead "make[s] a show that they love even more enjoyable." Conversely, discursive evidence indicates that most misdirection film fans agree with *USA Today's* Mike Clark who, in a review of *The Sixth Sense* (1999), claims its changeover should be preserved because "anybody who would divulge that deserves the kind of fate that would permit young Cole to see him walking around in blood" (10E).

Even though there may be similarities in how misdirection narratives are structured on film and television, the differences in the ways they are typically received begins to illustrate why it is appropriate to conceive of these films as constituting a distinct genre. Of course, spoiler warnings are also used for many other types of Hollywood films that do not fall in the misdirection genre, particularly those that are also loaded with narrative surprises or complexities. This suggests some of the drawbacks of solely relying on discursive evidence from user groups to determine generic categorizations because many films that do not inspire retrospective reinterpretations of all that has come before also are associated with these utterances. Like other humanistic methods, the discursive approach to genre is inexact and subjective because it has a strong qualitative dimension that cannot be precisely quantified. There is, for instance, no minimum threshold of utterances that determines if a given film should be classified in a genre. More importantly, the existence of such evidence is often a matter of happenstance to begin with, which leads to unsystematic results that can leave generic creation in the hands of those whose motives for executing the groupings vary widely.

Despite these methodological shortcomings, there are numerous reasons why the discursive approach is useful to theorists who strive to avoid traditional genre study's ahistorical pitfalls. Rick Altman's *Film/Genre* seminally illustrates how the discursive approach's culturally and historically attuned method considers film genres to be "defined by multiple codes, corresponding to the multiple groups who, by helping to define the genre, may be said to 'speak' the genre" (208). This summary shows how the discursive approach can free genre study from its static and reductive trappings by perceiving of genres as cultural categories always subject to reconstitution based on how user groups define them at distinct moments. Thus, I rely on Altman's semantic/syntactic/pragmatic model to highlight how the misdirection films' textual properties (semantics) and meanings (syntax) prompt groups of people to engage with them (pragmatics) in ways that separate them from other Hollywood fare.

Many scholars recently attempting to rescue genre theory from its ahistorical leanings also incorporate pragmatics to highlight how user groups, such as audiences, critics, exhibitors, and producers, contribute to perpetually fluctuating categorizations. James Naremore posits in *More Than Night*, for example, that film noir is best conceived of as "a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings that helps to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies" (11). Film noir is a touchstone category for genre theorists precisely because the term was coined *ex post facto* by French critics. Even though no one set out to make a film noir during

its classical period since the genre had not been created yet, constituent films were distinct to those who classified them in the group retroactively. Regardless of how capricious or accurate any of these originating critics' categorizations are, their ramifications have been significant. The genre's conventions have been frequently mobilized by filmmakers since at least the late 1960s often to challenge some Hollywood standards and certain dominant ideologies. I grant that such accounts of film noir's history and legacy may overstate the genre's unconventionality and its ideological uniformity; however, its atypical characteristics were recognizable to those who initially identified it and their definitions of the genre have since influenced many producers. Genres, in short, are both out there and not out there. Definitive elements are always arbitrary and subject to change, but those very conceptions can instrumentally shape production trends for years to come.

Unfortunately, the way that the discursive approach to genre has developed discourages this critical intervention because it dissuades scholars from birthing new categories. According to most accounts, the discursive approach in Film Studies can be traced back to Andrew Tudor, who, in the 1970s, presciently argued that genre study is predicated on a self-fulfilling prophecy that adheres to a circular logic, whereby constituent texts are cherry-picked to exemplify the attributes already thought to distinguish a category. To counter this methodological shortcoming, Tudor instead views genres as "sets of cultural conventions" defined by what groups of people "collectively believe them to be" at given historical moments (139). This is the key principle that guides Mittell's influential, yet misguided, application of the discursive approach in *Genre and Television*, in which he urges scholars to "examine the cultural processes of generic discourse *prior* to examining the generic texts that have been traditionally viewed as identical to the genre itself" (emphasis in original, 16). Discovering utterances that reveal a film's generic identity *first* indeed mitigates Tudor's empiricist dilemma. This approach, though, is contingent on luck that becomes more likely with the luxury of retrospect. To avoid succumbing to ahistorical methods, scholars have to wait for others to make the generic connections to get the hard proof to group constituents accordingly. More disconcertingly, the self-fulfilling prophecy is still possible, as the majority of discursive evidence can be ignored in favor of atypical utterances, such as Ebert's pejorative account of *Fight Club* cited in this chapter's epigraph.

Although Mittell urges critics to attend to the extratextual universe first, he admits that categories "run through texts," raising the specters of textual analysis and intertextuality in discursive genre study (*Genre* 13). Yet, he also critiques Altman for adding pragmatics to account for the

discursive surround as a mere addendum to his formative semantic/syntactic theory of genre, which, respectively, examines both a genre's recurrent textual elements and how those attributes are repeatedly deployed. Specifically, Mittell contends that "despite Altman's foregrounding of cultural processes, textual structure remains the centerpiece" rendering it incompatible with a focus on how "categories operate outside the bounds of the text" (*Genre* 16). Mittell, therefore, encourages a turn to textual evidence *only after* the requisite extratextual utterances are discovered, regardless of how random the rationale is for their inclusion in the first place. To take *Fight Club* as an example, according to this logic, I could mention the self-aware references to its duplicitous narrative as confirmers of its status as a misdirection film only because Ebert luckily connected it already to *The Usual Suspects* (1995). Consequently, the unnamed narrator's (Edward Norton) voiceover after discovering that Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) is a product of his dissociative identity disorder, in which he says it is "a changeover, the movie goes on and nobody in the audience has any idea" now becomes harmonious with Mittell's conception of the discursive approach.

The potential pitfalls of Mittell's application of discursive genre theory are more clearly evinced by a master key film, like *Magnolia*, which was not immediately classifiable in the misdirection film genre because it only became one thanks to belated utterances by critics and fans. Unsurprisingly, I have discovered no initial reviews and promotional materials that definitively categorize it as such. This is because the reasons for and meanings of writer/director Paul Thomas Anderson's inclusion of a climactic rain of frogs were designed to mystify, at least initially.



Figure 1.1. The unnamed narrator faints during *Fight Club's* changeover upon discovering that Tyler Durden is a manifestation of his dissociative identity disorder.

As with Berardinelli's review of *Magnolia* referenced in the epigraph, Ebert's review, which comes close to putting it in the misdirection genre, claims that the film's "threads converge, in one way or another, upon an event there is no way for the audience to anticipate. This event is not 'cheating,' as some critics have argued, because the prologue fully prepares the way for it, as do some subtle references to Exodus." Yet, he subsequently advises audiences to "Leave logic at the door" to appreciate the film fully. At best, then, reviewers could only speculate that *Magnolia* might be narratively coherent after repeated viewings, a critical trope that persists in reviews of some of Anderson's subsequent films also filled with seemingly eternal narrative ambiguities, especially *The Master* (2012). In his review of *The Master*, for instance, Colin Covert of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* epitomizes these suppositions by noting "Anderson's audacious films defy facile interpretation. Having seen it just once, I'm not sure I grasp it . . . I'm uncertain if the film's final scenes should be interpreted as dreams or reality." This discursive evidence merely suggests there *could* be a master key that unlocks the meaning of the film's many ambiguities, making it a stretch to call it a misdirection film only based on such speculation.

There are conceivably many instances for which no corroborating extratextual evidence exists for misdirection films prior to the publication of textual analysis that unearths their secrets. This presents a substantial challenge to identify potential constituents by using only pragmatics, which is why I adopt Altman's semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach rather than heed Mittell's call for scholars to turn to textual properties only after first identifying the requisite extratextual evidence. This is partly because producers can and do initiate intertextual connections, which can be accounted for by semantics and syntax, that help to situate films in generic categories. Another key shortcoming of Mittell's approach is that the chances of discovering discursive affirmations of generic identity are more remote for many films released before new technologies democratized both film criticism and repeat viewings in post-theatrical settings. This comparative dearth of available evidence makes critical discourse the most likely repository of these generic utterances because, as Altman theorizes, "critics' desires to use regenerification as part of their critical arsenal" are "unpreventable" (82). If such a critical tendency is inevitable, I contend that it should be embraced rather than avoided in spite of its ahistorical drawbacks. As Altman notes, critics' generic inventions can have positive outcomes. Decades ago, for example, numerous feminist-inspired scholars reclassified some melodramas into the non-industrially recognized woman's film genre. Although this regrouping is unverifiable using the discursive approach, as existing utterances did not categorize

them accordingly, the interventions of these scholars encouraged productive reconsiderations of these films in relation to patriarchy, Hollywood conventions, prevailing evaluations, and so on.

Historical distance, then, is the frill that permits theorists to map the discursive roots of critically generated genres, like the woman's film and film noir. Crucially, such originating utterances only exist in the first place because innovative scholars and critics created the labels and associated groupings based on semantic and syntactic evidence without waiting for others, like industry professionals, to do it for them. As Altman's rigorous historical research illustrates, these stories of generic initiation are not the exception because categories always calcify retroactively, regardless of who prompts the grouping. Now taken-for-granted monikers, such as the western and the musical, moved from first being adjectives associated with established categories to the nouns that ultimately denoted the genres themselves in industrial discourse (Altman 50–53). It is impossible to know, therefore, if or when a term will transform from being a modifier into the stable generic label itself. Although few media scholars have theorized how and why their own generic creations come into fruition, literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov tried to justify his origination efforts by distinguishing between "theoretical" and "historical" genres in his book, *The Fantastic*, a genre he invented that is characterized by the reader's hesitation between the uncanny and the marvelous, two related genres he also birthed. Fifteen years later, though, Todorov retracted his position by arguing that while it is "always possible" for individual critics to identify "a property common to two texts, and to put them together in a category," genre becomes "useful and operative" when "we agree to call genres only the classes of texts that have been historically perceived as such" (*Genres* 17). To salvage Todorov's useful differentiation, Steve Neale contends that media scholars should "distinguish theoretical genres from genres proper by renaming the former 'theoretical categories'" (43). In contrast, I argue that the term "theoretical genres" is appropriate because it's impossible to know if or when new terms and groupings will redraw previously agreed-upon boundaries.

Despite all of its problems, it is misguided to abandon the notion of genre entirely because it remains the primary way that groups, such as critics, exhibitors, producers, and spectators, relate Hollywood films to one another and differentiate them from each other. Marketing strategies for misdirection films begin to reveal why it is valuable to use Todorov's notion of theoretical genres rather than completely jettison the concept of genre. In particular, it shows how producers have capitalized on a growing awareness of these films as distinct in the minds of audiences, while,

at the same time, accentuating their historical generic identities. These practices were exemplified by taglines associated with *The Sixth Sense*. Although one of the film's taglines, "Not every gift is a blessing," highlights its status as a supernatural thriller, other taglines, such as "Discover the secret of *The Sixth Sense*" and "Can you keep a secret?," foreground its memorable changeover (imdb.com). Similarly, *The Usual Suspects* was marketed as a crime drama with the tagline "Five Criminals. One Line Up. No Coincidence." Additional taglines, including "The truth is always in the last place you look" and "In a world where nothing is as it seems you have to look beyond . . . ," though, more directly alert viewers that there will be significant narrative surprises (imdb.com). The impetus for this seemingly contradictory marketing strategy is twofold. On one hand, it maintains the secret by securing expectations in the conventions of historical genres that may not inspire retrospective reinterpretations of narrative information. On the other hand, it allows producers to advertise the films in a hybrid fashion, as belonging to historical genres as well as to a theoretical genre renowned for narrative unreliability that has not yet been industrially codified as such.

Theatrical trailers and television spots for misdirection films demonstrate a similar dual marketing approach. An advertisement that aired shortly after the release of *The Usual Suspects* clearly positions the film according to its historical and theoretical generic identities. The ad displays scenes from the film, as favorable excerpts from reviews are superimposed over the images. The first anecdote to appear is taken from Jack Kroll's *Newsweek* review, proclaiming it to be "The best crime movie of the 90s." This reaffirmation of the film's status in a historical genre is followed by an omniscient narrator's voiceover and snippets from other reviews that emphasize the presence of the changeover. The words "Twist . . . Twist . . . Twist," are extracted from Tom Christie's *Details* review and coupled with the narrator's statement that the film has a "twist and a twist and a twist." Immediately thereafter, the narrator announces that the film has "a whopper of an ending," as the same phrase from Janet Maslin's *New York Times* review concurrently appears onscreen. In short, even though the commercial begins by situating the film as a crime drama, it subsequently accentuates its status as a misdirection film.

A cursory examination of film reviews also indicates that critics use language to describe these films as part of a theoretical genre by discussing them in ways that differ from their historical generic identities. Ebert's aforementioned reference to *The Usual Suspects* and aversion to its legion of imitators undoubtedly connects films officially categorized in other genres according to a new criterion that identifies their unique

narrative structures as the semantic element that binds them together. Critic Rob McKenzie makes similar observations in response to the same upcropping of films:

Nowadays, though, what used to be a surprise is like the toy at the bottom of the Cracker Jack Box; it's a surprise that is not a surprise, but if we don't get it, we feel ripped off. Not only are these twist endings almost inevitable, they've gotten a lot more twisted. What used to be a denouement—literally the untying of the knot—is now just as often a renouement. We can suspend our suspension of disbelief for the first 95% of the show because everything we need to believe is at the end. These films are like Enron's double bookkeeping: one story going on at the surface, the awful truth percolating unseen beneath. (SP 7)

These kinds of reactions exemplify how critics attempt to place labels, such as “Keyser Söze syndrome,” “twist endings,” and “renouement,” on films that are industrially classified in other ways. Clearly, critics have written about these seemingly unrelated films in a manner that groups them together and distinguishes them from other Hollywood fare. The discourses surrounding these films demonstrate that various groups of people cluster otherwise unrelated Hollywood films together because of the particular narrative engagement that they demand from spectators.

Yet, as the spoiler warning issue suggests, discursive evidence alone is often not enough to distinguish misdirection films from others in closely affiliated genres that do not encourage the exact same viewer activities. Many other types of films have dramatic surprises at the end, but very few of these revelations also inspire spectators to reinterpret the meaning of virtually everything that has come before. If the discursive approach is coupled with more conventional genre analysis, then such issues can be redressed. Altman's semantic/syntactic/pragmatic model is thus appropriate because it combines discursive analysis with an examination of the films' textual properties and recurrent meanings. Continued attention to semantics and syntax offers the possibility of including otherwise neglected films in the genre, in turn, creating the requisite discursive evidence for subsequent scholars to justify sustained groupings in a historically sound fashion. The value of this approach can be best demonstrated by a brief discussion of how misdirection films are related to other genres with similar semantic and syntactic elements, but also have unique enough textual properties to distinguish them from these affiliated films.

If You've Seen One, You Haven't Seen Them All: Differentiating the Misdirection Film

Hollywood has long depended on genre to niche market a relatively undifferentiated product line that largely adheres to classical storytelling and representational conventions. That is not to say that the industry's strategy is to promote generic purity. As Altman's historical analysis reveals, Hollywood usually downplays generic specificity in favor of hybridity in marketing campaigns. After all, the classical film's dual plot structure—the primary quest narrative and the heterosexual romance subplot—is engineered partly to appeal, respectively, to perceived masculine desires for action and to purportedly feminine wishes to see characters overcome romantic relationship struggles. Yet, a film's semantic genre elements, particularly when they are explicitly foreground from the outset, as they are in most classical films, can modify viewer expectations. For David Bordwell, generic motivation always has a potential bearing on the kinds of hypothesis forming activities that the spectator conducts when viewing classical Hollywood films. He contends that genre cues and constrains interpretive activities further than the classical film already does by limiting the narrative outcomes most likely to occur. For instance, he argues that most Hollywood films are clearly positioned as constituents of genres that, unlike the misdirection film, do not purposely mislead spectators about the meaning of most narrative information. Instead, viewer guesses about narrative causality are typically met in a highly predictable fashion because a majority of Hollywood films end when the protagonist's clearly defined goals are satisfactorily attained or denied, fulfilling expectations raised at the start and leaving no primary causal lines of action dangling permanently.

Bordwell acknowledges that some Hollywood genres contain narratives that intentionally fool spectators about the meaning of information. The whodunit film is just one prominent example of a genre in which spectators expect that crucial narrative information will be withheld. In the whodunit, a primary player is usually revealed to possess seemingly secure character traits that unexpectedly prove to be unstable by the conclusion. The genre conventions, therefore, encourage spectators to determine who is misleading them before he or she is unmasked as the culprit. In an attempt to explain why virtually all films of this ilk should still be considered classical in spite of these tendencies, he theorizes that the expectations raised by genre are what keep them from being non-classical. Bordwell maintains that the whodunit film is classical because its "overt play of narration and hypothesis forming is generically motivated," meaning that "we want uncertainty, we expect both characters and

narration to try and deceive us, and we therefore erect specific sorts of first impressions, cautious provisional ones, based as much upon generic conventions as upon what we actually learn” (*Classical* 40). The con artist film is another prime example of a genre that is difficult to label as non-classical even though it induces both diegetic characters and viewers to interpret narrative information in a manner that ultimately proves to be incorrect, usually because of the exposure of a late revelation. I do not, therefore, include contemporaneous Hollywood con artist films, such as *Catch Me if You Can* (2002) and *Matchstick Men* (2003), or any of David Mamet’s similarly themed films, like *The Spanish Prisoner* (1997) and *Redbelt* (2008), in the misdirection film genre precisely because, following Bordwell’s logic, their narrative revelations expose elaborate ruses in accordance with the expectations raised from the beginning.

Misdirection films, by contrast, are often packaged as constituents of historical genres that do not alert audiences that they will be narratively unreliable: *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) is a biopic, *Unbreakable* (2000) is a superhero film, *Atonement* (2007) is a romantic drama, and so on. Of course, not all misdirection films are marketed in a manner that disguises the presence of a likely duplicitous narrative. However, misdirection films packaged as constituents of historical genres that are designed to mislead spectators, such as the mystery, detective, and thriller, also provoke them to reinterpret narrative information in a patently non-classical fashion. Misdirection films advertised as detective films, for example, typically do not abide by the same rules that traditionally govern the classical detective film. Like the whodunit, Bordwell argues that even though the Hollywood detective film often misleads viewers about the veracity of character motivation to prevent them from guessing its unexpected revelation, it still ultimately adheres to the rules that govern the classical film. Again, he relies on generic motivation as his primary defense for this argument. Bordwell claims that Hollywood detective films abide by the tenets of “fair play,” a set of rules that became codified in detective literature, which imply that “the reader has as good a chance to discover the solution as the detective does” (*Narration* 67). As long as the viewer is made aware that there is a puzzle to solve and has a legitimate chance to figure it out before the explanation occurs, the detective film should still be considered classical because generic conventions compensate for its apparent departures from Hollywood’s narrative and formal principles.

As David Richter’s analysis of *Fallen* (1998) demonstrates, however, misdirection films packaged in the detective genre typically fool audiences precisely because they violate the tenet of fair play. *Fallen* centers on detective John Hobbes’s (Denzel Washington) effort to hunt down and kill a murderous demon named Azazel, who has possessed a series

of human hosts. The film begins *in media res*, as Hobbes explains, in voiceover, that what is being depicted is his brush with death. The reasons that he describes the event as such, though, do not become apparent until the end of the film. When the film returns to the opening scene at the conclusion, it finally starts to become clear that Hobbes previously described this moment as his near-death experience because it portrays the detective's attempt to destroy the demon. Specifically, he has concocted a plan to lure it to a deserted location to trick it into possessing him after he kills its current host and then ingests fast-acting poison to kill himself. Importantly, it already has been established that Azazel can only possess a new victim if its current host comes into direct contact with another living person, meaning that the demon should die after Hobbes commits suicide. Even though there are no other potential human hosts present, the demon does not perish after it enters Hobbes's rapidly dying body. Instead, it possesses a stray cat that inspects Hobbes as the poison takes effect. The revelation scene, as Richter explains, thus, invalidates the spectator's expectations of both "story logic and conventions of representation" (15). In terms of narrative, the established rules made it seem as though the demon could only possess human beings. As it relates to form, the presence of Hobbes's voice in the opening narration made it virtually impossible to guess that it was actually the demon describing its near death experience as it possessed the detective momentarily before it moved to its feline host. Although the film's genre immediately signals its narrative unreliability, it cannot be comprehended according to habitual standards because the revelation violates the spectator's expectations in such a way that it is almost impossible that anyone could have predicted the resolution before its exposure.

These examples reveal why an exploration of semantics, most notably, how the revelation transforms the meaning of information in ways that distinguish these films from similar genres, is a good starting point for identifying constituents that have not been discursively labeled accordingly, or for providing the corroborating evidence for films that have been already grouped as such by random utterances. According to Altman and other genre theorists, though, semantics should be combined with syntax partly to compensate for taxonomic genre theory's tendency to downplay film's relation to culture. Syntax attends to how semantic elements are recurrently deployed in connection to relevant cultural conditions by examining their thematic significance. This kind of genre study has been often referred to as the myth or ritual approach, which is exemplified by Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres*. In that book, he theorizes that film genres remain salient as long as they provide satisfactory, imaginary resolutions to irreconcilable ideological oppositions in the

broader cultural sphere. Hence the reason that the continued, formulaic deployment of semantic elements that characterize genres consistently appeals to audiences. The misdirection film, therefore, leverages its fundamental semantic element—the changeover and the master key—in relation, at least in part, to the spectator’s desire to access the “truth” during an age in which its very existence has been increasingly challenged.

In subsequent years, Schatz and other adherents of the myth and ritual approach have been rightly criticized for relying on the method to achieve ahistorical ends. Although such a perspective can yield historically sound connections between films and their contexts, it has been typically deployed to show that genres always resolve underlying cultural tensions in the same fashion and evolve toward increasing self-consciousness, as they supposedly move from a nascent developmental phase to a self-referential stage of maturity. It is inaccurate, then, to contend that all contemporary misdirection films express the same ideological agenda in relation to the status of the “truth.” Even though most misdirection films contain revelations that assuage fears about relativity, there are some that seem to revel in perpetual uncertainty. I also do not want to imply that the interpretations of any of the misdirection films presented in this book are absolute. My readings and the ones offered by fans that I rearticulate are often persuasively countered by alternative comprehensions because elements contained in many of these films, like eternal ambiguities, provoke a plurality of viable interpretations. Additionally, it is a mistake to claim that the genre has become increasingly self-reflexive over time, as there have always been varying degrees of intertextual references in the genre. In *Arlington Road* (1999), for instance, Oliver Lang (Tim Robbins) exclaims “I guess we’re not in Kansas anymore, eh, Toto.” Such an explicit reference to a highly recognizable misdirection antecedent—*The Wizard of Oz* (1939)—is significant because 1999 is the very year that these films began flooding the market and became culturally ubiquitous. Producers of *Arlington Road* had no idea that, just one month later, the release of *The Sixth Sense* would dominate the box office for weeks, spawn a legion of imitators, and contain dialogue that would become inescapable in popular culture. Self-reflexivity occurs at any point in a genre’s development, especially because various groups, including scholars, can retroactively identify semantic and syntactic generic links, irrespective of filmmaker motives.

The impossibility of determining authorial intent begins to suggest why semantics and syntax are best combined with a pragmatic approach to genre. Since accessing the minds of filmmakers directly is a fantasy, an examination of discourses that circulate around and run through these films, including textual evidence itself, reveals how genres operate

culturally. In *American Film Cycles*, Amanda Ann Klein provides a foundation for privileging pragmatics by arguing that “while film genres are primarily defined by the repetition of key images (their semantics) and themes (their syntax), film cycles are primarily defined by how they are used (their pragmatics)” (4). Although I agree with her that pragmatics should be paramount, I do not share her view that this applies only to cycles and not to genres. As Klein correctly notes, existing genre theory typically treats cycles “as messy structures in flux, poised either to become stable genres or to disappear quickly” (6). Herein lies the rub with the notion of the cycle. Since genres are a retroactive phenomenon, cycles are always on the precipice of turning into a genre. Labeling a set of films as a cycle is a precarious endeavor if the premise is based on the fact that it suddenly becomes a genre when groups of people notice that it reappears. Such logic renders the occasionally used term “transhistorical cycle” contradictory or nonsensical because once a set of films with similar semantic and syntactic properties, like misdirection films, returns and is discursively identified, it can be characterized as a genre. An examination of the discourses circulating within and outside of the text demonstrates how semantics and syntax are interpreted and activated by various groups to construct generic parameters at various historical moments.

Despite her insistence on emphasizing the unique properties of the cycle, many of Klein’s central notions are applicable to my exploration of the misdirection film genre. In addition to foregrounding the importance of pragmatics, her work indicates how studying particular moments in a genre’s history can yield precise findings about its relationship to its specific contexts. She contends that it is possible to “view film cycles as a mold placed over the zeitgeist, which, when pulled away reveals the contours, fissures, and complicated patterns of the contemporary moment” (Klein 20). A small slice of a genre’s history can indeed reveal more micro-level information than an exhaustive genre study does about a set of films’ relationships not only to concrete cultural circumstances, but also to more exact industrial and technological conditions. I focus only on contemporary misdirection films, then, because I intend to show how they have been constructed in direct response to particular cultural, industrial, and technological changes that impacted commercial film producers and audiences during a specific period in time. As Klein’s study also highlights, such claims about the links between genres and their contexts are further strengthened by grounding them historically within the discursive surround. Consequently, the following examples epitomize how utterances related to this group of films circulate as well as how and why such discourses can significantly alter the ways in which constituents of the genre are discussed, evaluated, and understood for years to come.

Obliterating the “Ideal” Man: *Fight Club’s* Misunderstood Changeover

The story of the belated appreciation of *Fight Club* is already a legendary illustration of this phenomenon. It is correctly identified as a key moment in the history of post-theatrical exhibition because it was one of the first films to be completely reassessed as a consequence of its tremendously effective DVD release. Its delayed success in the aftermarket is partially attributable to the way that the film’s two-disc collector’s edition DVD (2000) was packaged for consumption more strategically than its theatrical release. *Fight Club’s* theatrical marketing campaign told spectators little about the film itself. The promotional materials, for instance, centered as heavily on a pink bar of soap as they did the actors in the drama. *Fight Club’s* taglines were also intentionally ambiguous. One positioned the film as being about “mischief, mayhem, and soap” and another claimed that it “works great even on bloodstains” (imdb.com). Although these advertisements subtly allude to the film’s commentary on consumerism and masculinity in the United States, they most clearly obfuscate its narrative content. Such tactics were employed for two primary reasons. First, they functioned not to alienate *Fight Club’s* intended audience—young, white, heterosexual men—by making the film’s explicit critique of their behaviors implicit. Second, they cloaked the changeover entirely, a tactic that departs from conventional misdirection film advertising because it generally at least alludes to the presence of an alternate way to interpret the narrative.

By contrast, in addition to promoting its then virtually unprecedented array of special features, the back cover of the two-disc collector’s edition DVD alerts audiences that the *New York Times* claims that *Fight Club* “just might require another viewing,” blatantly signaling the presence of its changeover. Moreover, many of the excerpted quotations that pepper the booklet accompanying the DVD foreground the film’s critiques of conventional masculinity. The final quote listed in the insert, for instance, is from Bret Easton Ellis, author of *American Psycho*, another renowned novel from the period that similarly critiques hegemonic masculinity and was adapted into a misdirection film, who claims that *Fight Club* both “rages against the hypocrisy of a society that continually promises us the impossible: fame, beauty, immorality, life without pain” and is a “dizzying take on the male fear of losing power.” In sum, the film only found a core audience after both its duplicitous narrative and depiction of contemporary white, heterosexual, American male paranoia were featured prominently in its advertising.

The importance of the changeover in the film's aftermarket resurrection cannot be overstated. Fan discourse illustrates the impact of its narrative structure on its now lofty, but still controversial, reputation. Spectators have consistently expressed uncertainty about *Fight Club's* gender politics in the years since its theatrical release, spawning great disagreement online about the film's cultural merits, or lack thereof. A fan who posted on the film's "User Comments" page on the *Internet Movie Database* in April 2008, for instance, calls *Fight Club* "the greatest movie ever made" and declares that it provides "great insight into the universal male psychology" (imdb.com). Unfortunately, it is impossible to guess exactly what this contributor believes the film has to say about men because, as other participants on the site demonstrate, there is substantial disagreement about its final message in light of the changeover's meaning. For example, a presumably male viewer's response, accessed at the same time as the one above, reports that after seeing the film he "wanted to move into a broken house and get in touch with the primordial nature that has been silenced in men everywhere by years of materialism bullshit" (www.imdb.com). Conversely, another contemporaneous viewer's comment speculates that "the solution Tyler offers is horrible, but he's so charismatic that you'll hardly notice it" (www.imdb.com). On one hand, then, for some spectators, Tyler's character represents the remedy for dispossessed American men. On the other hand, some spectators interpret the film as ultimately lambasting the narrator's hyper-masculine alter-ego.

Reviewers were similarly divided about *Fight Club's* commentary on gender. Peter Rainer of *New York* magazine blasts the film for depicting "the squall of an essentially white-male generation that feels ruined by the privileges of women and a booming economy." *Entertainment Weekly's* Lisa Schwarzbaum similarly complains that the film "floats the idiotic premise that a modern-day onslaught of girly pop-cultural destinations (including IKEA and support groups) has resulted in a generation of spongy young men unable to express themselves as fully erect males." In contrast, Michael Wilmington of the *Chicago Tribune* claims that the film "satirizes and examines violence far more than exploiting it" because it is a "hilarious ride into the twisted recesses of the modern male psyche, with an amazing knife-twist surprise ending that some may compare to the ending of *The Sixth Sense*." In addition to praising the film's gender politics, Wilmington also champions its changeover, which, like Ebert, he connects directly to another prominent misdirection film. This is significant not only because it provides further discursive evidence of *Fight Club's* placement in the misdirection film genre. It also showcases the connections between how the changeover is interpreted and the

way in which the film's larger take on masculinity is understood. Ebert's negative discussion of the film's changeover, for instance, bleeds into an unfavorable discussion of its portrayal of gender by characterizing it as "macho porn" that women "will instinctively see through" even though "men may get off on the testosterone rush." The discrepancy about the film's gender politics often hinges on how viewers comprehend the changeover's significance and its retroactive domino effect on the film's entire meaning, suggesting why there is a lot at stake in how it has been read in relation to genre and other constituents of the misdirection film category.

As these responses to the film indicate, *Fight Club* contains a complex narrative that is challenging to decipher initially and remains confounding on repeated viewings despite the fact that it has a changeover that ostensibly reveals its secrets unambiguously. The narrative centers on the reasons for and proposed remedies to the unnamed narrator's (who often refers to himself as "Jack," one of the pseudonyms he uses at support groups) malaise. The main cause for the film's polarized reception is the vastly different interpretations that persist even after the exposure of the changeover about what the film identifies as the culprits for and antidotes to the narrator's problems. Determining the film's takes on gender and sexuality, then, depend on how the changeover's significance is understood retrospectively. Most notably, considerable debate remains in virtual communities about the extent of the unnamed narrator's dissociative identity disorder, which Tyler is revealed to be a manifestation of during the film's memorable changeover sequence. Some fans speculate that, like the characters introduced and incorrectly presumed to be real in similarly themed misdirection films, such as *A Beautiful Mind* and *Identity* (2003), that a number of *Fight Club*'s other characters, most prominently, Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter), may also be imagined, alternate personas. Such discussions are epitomized by the forum on the website, *Movie & TV Stack Exchange.com*, entitled "In *Fight Club* is Marla Singer a second figment of Jack's imagination?". Obviously, if Marla—the film's sole, primary female character—is only a fabricated product of the narrator's disorder, then interpretations of how she and the other characters are represented are likely to shift drastically.

Fight Club's narrator is initially depicted as a cubicle-inhabiting, corporate drone who works as a product recall cost appraiser for a large automaker and takes orders from a male boss who is infatuated with traditionally feminine concerns, like the color cornflower blue. The narrator's emasculating role demands that he help the company make huge profits by concealing the dangers associated with their vehicles. As the sequence in which the narrator's condo breathtakingly transforms into

the pages of a furniture catalog illustrates, he seems to put up with the job to feed his insatiable hunger for consumer products. When his condo unexpectedly explodes and all of his possessions are incinerated, however, his values begin to change. The narrator's metamorphosis is guided by his decision to reach out for help to a mysterious acquaintance, named Tyler Durden, instead of Marla, the woman he loves to hate, after his condo is destroyed. When Tyler and the narrator subsequently meet at Lou's Tavern, it becomes apparent that the charismatic Tyler is trying to shepherd the narrator's masculine transformation by spewing cliché-ridden rants about the feminizing forces he deems responsible for their problems, such as the influences of consumer culture on traditional manhood.

Upon leaving the bar, Tyler alludes to a budding sexual tension between the two by asking the narrator to "cut the foreplay and just ask" if he can stay at his place. After the narrator finally makes the request, Tyler invites him to squat at his dilapidated house until he gets his life back together. In return for the favor, Tyler demands that the narrator "hit him as hard as he can," leading to their first fight. Surprisingly, the uptight narrator finds the sadomasochistic activity to be pleasurable because during their almost post-coital exchange, the narrator informs Tyler that "they should do this again sometime." When the two finally arrive at Tyler's house, however, it becomes clear that they will not be consummating their relationship with homosexual activity. As Melissa Iocco theorizes, the film's heterosexist tendencies are evident when Tyler shows him around the house because he only points out the location of the bathroom and stresses that they will stay in separate bedrooms. She keenly notes that his tour of the place reveals that "now that they are in a different and more personal environment and situation, their bodies and fluids should not mingle" (Iocco 52). A strictly homosocial relationship then develops between the two, eventually encouraging the narrator to emulate Tyler by giving up all of his possessions. The friends end up founding a bare-knuckled boxing organization, called "Fight Club," which meets in the basement of Lou's Tavern, to help other emasculated men reclaim their lost manhood. In this restricted setting, these seemingly feminized men also regain their virility by attaining sadomasochistic satisfaction, albeit in a violent and patently non-sexualized fashion.

Under Tyler's direction, Fight Club eventually "leaves the basement" and turns into a full-fledged rebellion, referred to as "Project Mayhem." Juxtaposed with the comparatively diverse Fight Club, Project Mayhem is comprised almost exclusively of young, white, and presumably heterosexual men, who are bent on annihilating the feminizing forces that they perceive to be the causes of their predicament. As Iocco contends, by taking this turn, the film ultimately seems to promote "homosocial

and male bonding through violence and destruction” (50). Importantly, the film also shuts down the possibility that a homosexual relationship will ever develop between Tyler and the narrator. During their most sexually tinged scene in the house’s bathroom, a naked Tyler tells the narrator what he believes is at the root of their problems. While taking a bath, he and the narrator share stories about how they were abandoned by their fathers, leading Tyler to speculate that “we’re a generation of men raised by women, I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer to our problem.” Thus, it seems that the burgeoning revolution should potentially strengthen the latent sexual bond between Tyler and the narrator by removing women from the picture, but it ultimately has the opposite effect.

For many critics and scholars, the presence of this kind of troubling dialogue that scapegoats women and fantasizes about eliminating them is a testament to *Fight Club*’s misogynistic sensibility. In fact, the film has been condemned by a number of scholars, such as Terrell Carver, who disavows it for its purportedly reprehensible treatment of Marla Singer, whom he interprets as a metaphor for “‘woman,’ very enigmatic and ‘other’” who is “dangerous and unpredictable, sexually voracious in a totally ludicrous way and in sum the object in the most basic and stereotypical kind of male fantasy” (130). In relation to the film’s complicated takes on capitalism and patriarchy, Henry Giroux also reads the film as having reactionary tendencies. He theorizes that *Fight Club* “is less interested in attacking the broader material relations of power and strategies of domination and exploitation associated with neoliberal capitalism than it is in rebelling against a consumerist culture that dissolves the bonds of male sociality and puts into place an enervating notion of male identity and agency” (henrygiroux.com). For Giroux, the film only draws attention to the ways that late capitalism and the associated triumph of consumerism have purportedly feminized many white, heterosexual, middle- and working-class men, meaning that it fails to demonstrate how neoliberalist economic policies have consolidated the power of elites and made it more difficult for traditionally subjugated groups to attain equality in economic, political, and social arenas.

Although Giroux’s reading is admirable, it does not jibe with the ways in which *Fight Club*’s ending encourages viewers ascribing to the “Marla is just another persona” explanation to reinterpret narrative information much differently. Like Carver, Giroux claims that Marla functions as a metonymical stand-in for the kind of women who some men would like to believe “exist to simultaneously make men unhappy and to service their sexual needs.” Such a portrayal, Giroux argues, “reinscribes white heterosexuality within a dominant logic of stylized brutality and male