

7 September 2009

Never Been Kicked*

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TYLER: Never been in a fight. You?

THE NARRATOR: No, but that—that's a good thing.

TYLER: No, it is not.¹

1. Introduction

In this paper, I argue that *Fight Club* (1999) is a romantic comedy. More precisely, I argue that *Fight Club* is correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*. This conclusion leaves open the possibility that it is also correct to perceive the film in genres in which it is usually perceived: *drama*, *say*, or *dark comedy*.² But, still, the conclusion is not trivial, since it is not also correct to perceive *Fight Club* in many

* For comments and discussion, thanks to Eva Della Lana, Joyce Jenkins, Carl Matheson, Rob Shaver, Brian Walter, and Thomas Wartenberg.

¹ Edward Norton's character is called 'Jack' in the script. See

http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/fightclub_2_98.html

(accessed 12 June 2009). But the character is called 'The narrator' in the closing credits. In the text, I follow the closing credits.

² Metacritic lists the genre of *Fight Club* as "drama." See

<http://www.metacritic.com/video/titles/fightclub>

(accessed 3 June 2009). The Internet Movie Database lists the genre of *Fight Club* as "Action/ Crime/ Drama/ Thriller" and includes "Dark Comedy," "Social Satire," "Satire," and "Dark Humor" among the approximately 175 plot keywords for the movie. (But then that list also includes "Reality," "Penguin," "Donut," and "Reference to Martha Stewart.") Neither "Romance" nor "Romantic Comedy" is on the list of plot keywords. "Love Hate Relationship" is, but it is not clear whether the love-hate relationship in question is between the narrator and Marla Singer or rather between the narrator and Tyler Durden. See

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0137523/>

and

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0137523/keywords>

(accessed 3 June 2009).

other genres in which it is not usually perceived: *documentary*, *say*, or *musical*. And the conclusion bears on the evaluation of the film, since it turns out that, on this interpretation, *Fight Club* is rather clever. I return to *Fight Club*'s cleverness in the penultimate section. I begin, in the next section, by presenting the theoretical framework that I rely on in the rest of the paper.

2. Categories and genres

2.1. Categories

In "Categories of Art," Kendall L. Walton (1970) argues for a pair of claims. The first claim is about the role that categories play in creating aesthetic appearances.

The category appearance claim: Which aesthetic properties a work of art appears to have depends on which category it is perceived in.³

(Walton (1970: 200) allows that one can simultaneously perceive a work of art in multiple categories: for example, *mass art*, *television episode*, *horror*, and *teen drama*. I ignore this complication in what follows.) Consider "Hush," which is roughly 44 minutes long and can be divided into three parts: the beginning, which is roughly 14 minutes long and has audible human dialogue; the middle, which is roughly 26 minutes long and has almost no audible human dialogue; and the

³ See Walton 1970: 201-210. Strictly speaking, Walton's (1970: 201) claim is that "what aesthetic properties a work seems to have ... depends (in part) on which of its features are standard, which variable, and which contra-standard for us." But which features of a work are standard, which variable, and which contra-standard for us depends on which categories we perceive that work in. See Walton 1970: 201. Standard, variable, and contra-standard features are discussed below in the text.

end, which is roughly 4 minutes long and has audible human dialogue.⁴ Perceived in the category *early 1920s silent film*, “Hush” appears to be alive with speech; whereas, perceived in the category *late 1990s television episode*, “Hush” appears to be eerily silent.

The second claim is about the role that categories play in creating aesthetic reality.

The category reality claim: Which aesthetic properties a work of art really has depends on which category it is correctly perceived in.⁵

In this case, “Hush” is an episode, one that was written and directed by Joss Whedon and that first aired in December 1999, from Season 4 of the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). So it is not correct to perceive it in the category *early 1920s silent film*, but it is correct to perceive it in the category *late 1990s television episode*. As a result, “Hush” really is eerily silent; but, even if it appears to be alive with speech when it is perceived in the category *early 1920s silent film*, it does not follow that it really is alive with speech.

⁴ The beginning part begins at the beginning and ends at the end of Act I. So it includes the opening credits and a wordless scene in which people’s voices are stolen. The middle part begins at the beginning of Act II and ends late in Act IV. So it includes scenes in which a computerized elevator voice intones 47 words, a newscaster on TV reads 154 words, a character uses a Stephen-Hawking-style voice synthesizer to produce 34 words, and a character screams audibly but wordlessly. The end part begins late in Act IV and ends at the end. So it includes the closing credits. A version of the script is available here:

http://www.buffyworld.com/buffy/scripts/066_scri.html

(accessed 3 June 2009).

⁵ Walton (1970: 216 n. 24) allows that it can be correct to perceive a work of art in multiple categories. What happens to its aesthetic properties in that case is a complicated question that he discusses but does not definitely answer. I will not be answering it here either.

2.2. Genres

The category appearance claim and the category reality claim are claims about categories in general. But each of these claims has an analogue that is about genres in particular.⁶ First, the analogue of the category appearance claim is a claim about the role that genres play in creating aesthetic appearances.

The genre appearance claim: Which aesthetic properties a work of art appears to have depends on which genre it is perceived in.

To take a fictional example, consider *The New Surgeon at St. Oswald's*, a 1957 manuscript by Lavinia Armitage that Morag McCoo reads for a publisher in Charles Palliser's (1994) novel *Betrayals*. Perceived in the genre *romance*, the ending—in which the new surgeon, Mr MacQuarrie ("Call me Jack"), eviscerates the naïve heroine, Nurse Marie Kelly—is surprising and out of place.⁷ This is in fact how *The New Surgeon* is perceived in *Betrayals*: McCoo perceives the manuscript in the genre *romance*—her report begins "*Editorial department: Romance*"—and describes the ending as "wholly ina[p]propriate."⁸ She suggests

⁶ It is not clear whether Walton thinks of genres as categories. In the version of the paper that appeared in the *Philosophical Review* in 1970, he says that perceptually distinguishable categories "include media, genre, styles, forms and so forth"; whereas, in the version of the paper that is reprinted in Walton 2008, he writes of perceptually distinguishable categories and "other media, genre, styles, and forms." (See Walton 1970: 198-199; cf. 338-339 in the original version.) In any case, I think that the genre appearance claim and the genre reality claim are true, whether or not Walton would regard them as instances of the category appearance claim and the category reality claim, respectively.

⁷ Palliser 1995: 51. In a later chapter, we learn that the manuscript was published in 1958 as *The Throat Surgeon*, which Sholto MacTweed reads as a *roman à clef*. (He thinks that it is about Jack the Ripper.) See Palliser 1995: 175-176. I ignore MacTweed's interpretation in the text.

⁸ Palliser 1995: 43, 51.

that “the final three or four sentences” be revised.⁹ By contrast, perceived in the genre *horror*, the ending is satisfying and fitting. McCoo considers sending *The New Surgeon* to “the editor of our *Gothic Horror* list” but, for reasons that are not manifest, says that in that case “the author will have to be asked to substantially revise it.”¹⁰

Second, the analogue of the category reality claim is a claim about the role that genres play in creating aesthetic reality.

The genre reality claim: Which aesthetic properties a work of art really has depends on which genre it is correctly perceived in.

If *The New Surgeon* is correctly perceived in the genre *romance*, then McCoo is right: the ending really is out of place and should be revised; whereas, if the manuscript is correctly perceived in the genre *horror*, then the ending really is fitting and does not need to be revised.

2.3. Four considerations

But how can we tell which category or genre a work of art is correctly perceived in? For example, how can we tell which genre *The New Surgeon* is correctly perceived in? Walton (1970: 212-213) mentions four considerations.¹¹ First, there is a consideration about the prevalence of a genre in a community.

⁹ Palliser 1995: 51. McCoo also suggests “a few minor revisions” to other passages, which describe surgical procedures in language that is “too disgusting to quote” and that “shows a complete misjudgement of what our readers are entitled to expect.” See Palliser 1995: 45, 51.

¹⁰ Palliser 1995: 43.

¹¹ I have transposed considerations about categories into considerations about genres. (See note 6.)

The prevalence consideration: If a genre *G* is “well established in and recognized by the society” in which a work of art *W* is produced, then that tells in favor of *W*’s being correctly perceived in *G*.¹²

In *Betrayals*, we are not directly told anything about when the author, Armitage, was writing; but we are told that the reader, McCoo, was reading the manuscript in 1957, and—given McCoo’s editorial department and the list whose editor she considers sending the manuscript to instead—*romance* and *horror* (or at least *Gothic horror*) were both recognized genres at the time. So, in this case, the prevalence consideration does not tell against *The New Surgeon*’s being correctly perceived in the genre *romance* or the genre *horror*; but it does not tell in favor of the manuscript’s being correctly perceived in one of those genres in particular.

Second, there is a consideration about the artist’s intentions.

The intention consideration: If the artist intends a work of art *W* to belong to a genre *G* or thinks of it as belonging to *G*, then that tells in favor of *W*’s being correctly perceived in *G*.¹³

In *Betrayals*, we do not know what Armitage’s intentions were. So the intention consideration does not tell in favor of, or against, *The New Surgeon*’s being correctly perceived in any genre. And, in any case, it is easy to place too much importance on the intention consideration. It is not generally true that, if an artist intends a work of art to be a certain way or thinks of it as being that way, then

¹² Walton 1970: 212.

¹³ See Walton 1970: 212.

that work of art really is that way. Walton (1970: 199) gives voice to this sentiment: “Surely (it seems) a Rembrandt portrait does not have (or lack) a sense of mystery in virtue of the fact that Rembrandt intended it to have (or lack) that quality, any more than a contractor’s intention to make a roof leakproof makes it so.”¹⁴ For example, Richard Kelly, the writer and director of *Donnie Darko* (2001), said that Frank (James Duval), Donnie Darko’s (Jake Gyllenhaal’s) sister’s boyfriend, has remembered what happened in a duplicate reality and is trying to warn Donnie to flee the jet engine that is about to crush him to death in his bed.¹⁵ But Frank is just honking his horn as he drives away. And M. Night Shyamalan, the writer and director of *Signs* (2002), said that the film “doesn’t have a twist” and added that, if you think that he makes films with twists, “you’re totally f--ked. It’s just too complex.”¹⁶ But *Signs* ends with the sudden revelation that everything that has been making Rev. Graham Hess (Mel Gibson) lose his faith—especially the death of his wife, Colleen (Patricia Kalember); the asthma of his son, Morgan (Rory Culkin); and the compulsion of his daughter, Bo (Abigail Breslin), to leave half-finished glasses of water lying around—is really part of a divine plan. Examples like these suggest that we should not place too much

¹⁴ Walton is not here endorsing the sentiment. He comes closer to endorsing it later, when he says “I am willing to agree that whether an artist intended his work to be coherent or serene has nothing essentially to do with whether it is coherent or serene.” See Walton 1970: 217. To multiply *Donnie Darko* examples, Richard Kelly might have intended the movie to be coherent. But his intending it so does not make it so.

¹⁵ “Commentary with Writer/Director Richard Kelly & Jake Gyllenhaal” on the *Donnie Darko* DVD.

¹⁶ Quoted in Kohn 2008.

importance on artists' intentions in general or the intention consideration in particular.

Third, there is a consideration about the features of the work of art itself.

The features consideration: If a work of art *W* has “a relatively large number” of features that are standard with respect to a genre *G* and “a minimum” of features that are contra-standard with respect to *G*, then that tells in favor of *W*'s being correctly perceived in *G*.¹⁷

A feature is *standard* with respect to a genre or category if and only if “it is among those in virtue of which works in that [genre or] category belong to that [genre or] category”; whereas a feature is *contra-standard* with respect to a genre or category if and only if its “presence tends to *disqualify* works as members of the [genre or] category.”¹⁸ (A feature that is neither standard nor contra-standard with respect to a genre or category is *variable* with respect to that genre or category.¹⁹) In the case of *The New Surgeon*, that one of the main characters dies a gruesome death is standard with respect to the genre *horror* but not with respect to the genre *romance*. And that the manuscript ends with the evisceration of its protagonist is contra-standard with respect to the genre *romance* but not with respect to the genre *horror*. (When it comes to genre, body count is a clue.) So the

¹⁷ Walton 1970: 212.

¹⁸ Walton 1970: 199; emphasis in original. It is not clear whether Walton defines standard, variable, and contra-standard features with respect to all categories or merely with respect to perceptually distinguishable categories. See Walton 1970: 198-199. In any case, I think that the distinction between standard, variable, and contra-standard features can be extended to all categories, whether or not Walton intended it to be so.

¹⁹ See Walton 1970: 199.

features consideration tells in favor of *The New Surgeon's* being correctly perceived in the genre *horror*, and it tells against the manuscript's being correctly perceived in the genre *romance*.

Fourth, there is a consideration about aesthetic evaluation.

The evaluation consideration: If a work of art *W* seems to be “better, or more interesting or pleasing aesthetically” when it is perceived in a genre *G* than it does when it is perceived in many other genres, then that tells in favor of *W's* being correctly perceived in *G*.²⁰

I do not know how aesthetically pleasing a manuscript that ends with an evisceration seems when it is perceived in the genre *horror*; but, when it is perceived in the genre *romance*, a manuscript that ends with an evisceration probably seems less aesthetically pleasing than that.²¹ So the evaluation consideration tells in favor of *The New Surgeon's* being correctly perceived in the genre *horror*, and it tells against the manuscript's being correctly perceived in the genre *romance*.

Care is required when using the evaluation consideration. As Walton (1970: 214) acknowledges, we cannot simply make up a genre *G*, point out that a work of art *W* seems aesthetically better when it is perceived in *G* than it does

²⁰ Walton 1970: 212.

²¹ There is also a meta point to be made here: *Betrayals* seems aesthetically better when *The New Surgeon* is perceived in the genre *horror*. One of the recurring points in *Betrayals* is that every text betrays itself. In this case, McCoo's report betrays itself by providing evidence about the true nature of *The New Surgeon*.

when it is perceived in many other genres, and conclude that *W* is correctly perceived in *G*. Otherwise, we could make up the genre *film developed by two famous directors, one famous for being dark, the other famous for being sentimental, where the point is to confuse the audience about which director is responsible for which part*, point out that *Artificial Intelligence: A.I.* (2001) seems aesthetically better when it is perceived in that genre than it does when it is perceived in the genre *drama* or the genre *science fiction*, say, and conclude that it is correctly perceived in the *film developed by two famous directors* genre.²² But *Artificial Intelligence* is not good, and it is not correctly perceived in that genre either. Still, neither the genre *horror* nor the genre *romance* is made up in the way that the *film developed by two famous directors* genre is. Both the genre *romance* and the genre *horror* were recognized in the community in which *The New Surgeon* was read. So it is legitimate to use the evaluation consideration to support the conclusion that *The New Surgeon* is correctly perceived in the genre *horror*.

In the rest of the paper, I discuss how Walton's four considerations—the prevalence consideration, the intention consideration, the features consideration, and the evaluation consideration—bear on the conclusion that *Fight Club* is correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*. Two of these considerations provide little or no support for the conclusion: the prevalence consideration does not tell against the conclusion, but it does not tell in favor of the conclusion either

²² Steven Spielberg, who developed the film with Stanley Kubrick, said, "all the parts of *A.I.* that people assume were Stanley's were mine. And all the parts of *A.I.* that people accuse me of sweetening and softening and sentimentalizing were all Stanley's." Quoted in Leydon 2002.

(Section 3), and the intention consideration provides only a limited amount of support for the conclusion (Section 4). But the features consideration and the evaluation consideration provide substantial support for the conclusion that *Fight Club* is correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy* (Sections 5-8).

3. The prevalence consideration

The genre *romantic comedy* was well established and widely recognized in North America in 1999, when *Fight Club* was released. For example, *Never Been Kissed*—a romantic comedy in which Josie Geller (Drew Barrymore), a geeky copy editor at the *Chicago Sun-Times*, goes undercover as a high school student and falls for her hockey-playing English teacher, Sam Coulson (Michael Vartan)—was also released that year. So the prevalence consideration does not tell against *Fight Club's* being correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*. But, of course, *romantic comedy* is not the only genre that was well established and widely recognized in North America in 1999. For example, the genre *mockumentary* was, too: *Best in Show*, a mockumentary about the obsessive owners of show dogs, was released in 2000. So the prevalence consideration does not tell against *Fight Club's* being correctly perceived in the genre *mockumentary* either, and hence it does not tell in favor of the film's being correctly perceived in either of those genres in particular. So, if we are looking for support for the conclusion that *Fight Club* is correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*, we should look to other considerations.

4. The intention consideration

Those behind *Fight Club* thought of it as a dark comedy. David Fincher, the director, compared it to the dark comedy *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* (1964), described it as “absurdist,” and said, “It’s a pitch-black comedy.”²³ Jim Uhls, the screenwriter, said that “there was nothing so dark” in the film that “it couldn’t be funny.”²⁴ Chuck Palahniuk, the author of the novel that the film was based on, said that the film is a comedy—at least until Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) burns the narrator’s (Edward Norton’s) hand with lye.²⁵ Edward Norton also compared the film to *Dr. Strangelove*, described it as “a comedy, or a black comedy, with a heavy element of satire,” and said, “It’s a comedy. It’s a dark comedy.”²⁶ Helena Bonham Carter, who played Marla Singer, said that the film is “satirical” and “intensely funny in a dark way.”²⁷ Brad Pitt compared the film to the satire *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and said, “I got into such an argument with a journalist. I tried to tell him this is a comedy. I got nowhere with him.”²⁸

A lot of the film is supposed to be funny: for example, Marla and the narrator being the only white people at a support group for people with sickle

²³ “Commentary: David Fincher” and “Commentary: David Fincher, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton & Helena Bonham Carter” on the *Fight Club* DVD.

²⁴ Quoted in Sragow 1999.

²⁵ “Commentary: Chuck Palahniuk and Jim Uhls” on the *Fight Club* DVD. Uhls agreed.

²⁶ “Commentary: David Fincher, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton & Helena Bonham Carter.”

²⁷ “Commentary: David Fincher, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton & Helena Bonham Carter.”

²⁸ “Commentary: David Fincher, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton & Helena Bonham Carter.”

cell anemia (Fincher: “This was a joke that was often lost on preview audiences”);²⁹ the narrator punching Tyler for the first time (Fincher: “I remember just almost falling out of my chair it was so funny It just cracked me up”);³⁰ a bag of human fat stolen from a liposuction clinic tearing on a fence topped with barbed wire (Bonham Carter: “This is such a disgusting but horribly darkly comic scene”);³¹ the narrator beating himself up in his boss’s (Zach Grenier’s) office (Fincher: “Jerry Lewis is not dead”);³² three cops—Detectives Andrew (Van Quattro), Kevin (Markus Redmond), and Walker (Michael Girardin)—trying to castrate the narrator (Pitt: “I think it’s so funny”);³³ and the narrator talking in a “f--ked up” voice after having shot his back left molar out the side of his face (Fincher: “People just started cracking up. And that’s hopefully what they should be doing. That’s my feeling about what they should be doing”).³⁴

At least one person behind *Fight Club* thought of it as a romantic comedy. Uhls described the film as “a romantic comedy, but not a typical romantic

²⁹ “Commentary: David Fincher.”

³⁰ “Commentary: David Fincher.”

³¹ “Commentary: David Fincher, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton & Helena Bonham Carter.”

³² “Commentary: David Fincher, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton & Helena Bonham Carter.” Palahniuk also made the comparison to Jerry Lewis. See “Commentary: Chuck Palahniuk and Jim Uhls.” Norton made a comparison to Jerry Lewis and Harold Lloyd. See “Commentary: David Fincher, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton & Helena Bonham Carter.”

³³ “Commentary: David Fincher, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton & Helena Bonham Carter.” Fincher and Norton agreed. The detectives are named after Andrew Kevin Walker, who worked on the script but, for reasons having to do with the Writers Guild of America, could not be mentioned in the credits.

³⁴ “Commentary: David Fincher.”

comedy.”³⁵ Given the intention consideration, that Uhls thought of *Fight Club* as a romantic comedy provides some support for the conclusion that the film is correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*. But it is not clear whether Fincher, Palahniuk, Norton, Bonham Carter, or Pitt thought of the film as a romantic comedy, although Fincher described Marla as a “romantic nihilist”; Norton said—probably facetiously—that in a scene in which the narrator apologizes to Marla the narrator “was so romantic” until she said, “You’re spectacular in bed”; and Palahniuk talked about the film’s “romantic ending.”³⁶ And, in any case, as I suggested in Section 2, there is reason not to place too much importance on the intention consideration. So, if we are looking for more than minimal support for the conclusion that *Fight Club* is correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*, we should continue looking to further considerations.

5. The features consideration I: plot

It is probably impossible to provide informative necessary and sufficient conditions for being in most genres.³⁷ I do not think that the genre *romantic comedy* is an exception. Still, many genres have standard plots. The following four plot elements are all standard for the genre *romantic comedy*: (i) mismatched romantic leads meet under unusual circumstances, (ii) someone is mistaken about someone’s identity, (iii) one of them comes to a sudden realization, and (iv)

³⁵ Quoted in Sragow 1999.

³⁶ “Commentary: David Fincher,” “Commentary: David Fincher, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton & Helena Bonham Carter,” and “Commentary: Chuck Palahniuk and Jim Uhls.”

³⁷ This sort of skepticism is common. It is shared by, for example, Cavell (1981) and Carroll (1982).

they end up together. *Fight Club* has all of those plot elements. Given the features consideration, this tells substantially in favor of the film's being correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*.

5.1. *Meet-cute*

In some romantic comedies, the romantic leads do not meet early on. For example, in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), although Annie Reed (Meg Ryan), a Baltimore journalist, has heard Sam Baldwin (Tom Hanks), a Seattle architect, on Dr. Marcia Fieldstone's (Caroline Aaron's) radio show and he has glimpsed her standing across the road, they do not actually meet until the end of the film. But, in most romantic comedies, the romantic leads, who are often mismatched, meet early on, often under unusual circumstances.³⁸ This is a standard feature of the genre *romantic comedy*. It is sometimes called a "meet-cute." "Say a man and a woman both need something to sleep in, and they both go to the same men's pajama department. And the man says to the salesman, 'I just need bottoms'. And the woman says, 'I just need a top'. They look at each other, and that's the meet-cute," an old-time screenwriter, Arthur Abbot (Eli Wallach), explains in *The Holiday* (2006).³⁹ For example, early on in *Roman Holiday* (1953), an American

³⁸ It is this mismatching of the romantic leads, especially when it is based on race or class, that allows certain films to be vehicles for social criticism. See Wartenberg 1999.

³⁹ In *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* (1938), it is actually the other way around: a millionaire American businessman, Michael Barndon (Gary Cooper), says, "I just want the tops" and the daughter of a destitute French nobleman, Nicole De Loisselle (Claudette Colbert), who it turns out is shopping for a bargain for her father, says, "I'll buy the trousers. ... I'm looking for pajamas for a gentleman, and for his purpose the trousers are enough."

journalist in Rome, Joe Bradley (Gregory Peck), who is walking home from a late-night poker game meets the princess of an unnamed European country, Ann (Audrey Hepburn), who is “snoozing away on a public street,” sleeping off a sedative after having escaped from her country’s embassy. And, early on in *Love Actually* (2003), a bashful young man, John (Martin Freeman), meets a friendly young woman, Just Judy (Joanna Page), when they are stand-ins for a copulating couple on the set of a pornographic film.

Fight Club is no different. Marla and the narrator are mismatched, and they meet under unusual circumstances. He is an uptight boy who wears button-down oxford shirts, lives in a condo, and works for a major car company. She is a reckless girl who wears black, lives in a seedy hotel, and sells clothes she steals from laundromats. They meet in a support group for people with a disease that neither of them has. He is there for the catharsis that allows him to sleep. She is there for the free coffee.

5.2. Mistaken identity

In some romantic comedies, no one is mistaken about who or what anyone is. For example, in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), Carrie (Andie McDowell) is not an American con artist who pretends to be a British noblewoman, and Charles (Hugh Grant) is not a paleontologist who pretends to be a big-game hunter. But, in many romantic comedies, the romantic leads are mistaken about who or what someone is. This is also a standard feature of the genre *romantic comedy*. In a normal case of mistaken identity, one of the romantic leads is mistaken about

who or what someone else is. For example, in *Charade* (1963), Brian Cruikshank (Cary Grant), a Treasury Department official at the US embassy in Paris, pretends in succession to be Peter Joshua, a charming divorced man; Alexander Dyle, a man who is trying to solve the murder of his brother, a wartime associate of Regina Lampert's (Audrey Hepburn's) late husband; and Adam Canfield, a thief who is after a quarter of a million dollars. Brian knows that he is not a charming divorced man, or Regina's late husband's wartime associate's brother, or a thief. But Regina does not. Complications ensue. (At one point, Regina says to Brian, "Do you realize you've had three names in the past two days? I don't even know who I'm talking to anymore.") And, in *Down with Love* (2003), Catcher Block (Ewan McGregor)—star journalist at *KNOW*, the magazine for men in the know, and "ladies' man, man's man, and man about town"—pretends to be a shy US astronaut, Major Zip Martin, to write an exposé on a "cool blonde," Barbara Novack, "a girl from Maine who wrote a book and came to New York," who is really a "bashful brunette," Nancy Brown (Renée Zellweger), who used to be his secretary. Catcher thinks that he has fooled her into thinking that he is an astronaut. But he has not; she knows that he is really her former boss. What he does not know is that she is really his former secretary. Again, complications ensue. (In a fantastic three-and-a-half-minute monologue, Nancy sums up the plot so far. "I knew that ... you would have to go undercover, assume a false identity, and pretend to be the kind of man who would make the kind of girl I was pretending to be fall in love," she explains.)⁴⁰

⁴⁰ *Down with Love* is a parody of films like *Pillow Talk* (1959). But that does not mean that *Down*

In an inverted case of mistaken identity, by contrast, one of the romantic leads is mistaken about who or what they are. This is what happens in *Fight Club*. The narrator thinks that he has a better-looking roommate, who he is jealous of, who is having sex with Marla, but he does not; he is the one who is having sex with her. The narrator does not know that he does not have a roommate, but Marla does. And, yes, complications ensue.

This is an innovative use of mistaken identity in a romantic comedy. Indeed, it is *Fight Club's* key variation on the genre. As far as I know, *Fight Club* is the only romantic comedy that features an inverted case of mistaken identity that does not rely on amnesia and in which the audience does not know what a character does not know. *Fight Club* is indeed, as Uhls says, not a typical romantic comedy. There are other films that feature inverted cases of mistaken identity. For example, in *Overboard* (1987), a rich socialite, Joanna Stayton (Goldie Hawn), falls off her husband's yacht and is misled into believing that she is Annie Proffitt, the wife of a lowly carpenter, Dean Proffitt (Kurt Russell). And, in *Angel Heart* (1987), a seedy detective, Harold Angel (Mickey Rourke), is hired to find a missing bandleader, Johnny Favourite. What Harold does not know is that, to avoid giving his soul to the devil as promised, Johnny the bandleader became Harold the detective. But both of these films rely on amnesia. And neither of them is a romantic comedy in which the audience does not know what

with Love does not possess features that are standard for the genre *romantic comedy*. On the contrary, it possesses features that are standard for the genre *romantic comedy*, but it does so in an exaggerated manner.

a character does not know. In *Angel Heart*, the audience does not know what Harold does not know, but the film is not a romantic comedy; it is a horror or mystery film. And *Overboard* is a romantic comedy, but the audience knows that the woman who thinks that she is a carpenter's wife is the socialite who fell off her husband's yacht. As we will see in Section 8, *Fight Club's* key variation on the genre *romantic comedy* matters to the evaluation of the film.⁴¹

5.3. Sudden realization

Some romantic comedies come to a climax when someone who is not one of the romantic leads realizes something about someone who is one of the romantic leads. For example, *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995) comes to a climax when Evelyn Roy (Stephanie Berry) finds her daughter, Evie (Nicole Ari Parker), a black girl who loves opera and whose father gave her a Range Rover, in bed with Randy Dean (Laurel Holloman), a white girl who digs classic rock and who works at a garage, and when Randy's aunt Rebecca (Kate Stafford) finds out that Randy does not have enough credits to graduate from high school.⁴² But most romantic comedies come to a climax when one of the romantic

⁴¹ This key variation on the genre *romantic comedy* also sets *Fight Club* apart from the films that Cavell (1981) has dubbed "comedies of remarriage." In those films, a character struggles to recognize the reality of another. (Here I am following Wartenberg 1999: 39.) In *Fight Club*, by contrast, a character struggles to recognize the unreality of another.

⁴² *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* is not part of the canon in the way that the great Nora Ephron romantic comedies from the 1980s and 1990s (*When Harry Met Sally ...* (1989), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), and *You've Got Mail* (1998)) or the great Richard Curtis romantic comedies from the 1990s and 2000s (*Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Notting Hill* (1999), and *Love Actually* (2003)) are. But I think that, like *Edge of Seventeen* (1998), *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* is a queer take on the great John Hughes teen romantic comedies from the 1980s: *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987). So I

leads realizes something about another romantic lead: when one of the romantic leads realizes how they feel about or that they really want to be with another of the romantic leads, say. This is also a standard feature of the genre *romantic comedy*. For example, *Notting Hill* comes to a climax when William realizes that he has been a “daft prick” for turning Anna down and rushes to her press conference. And *Keeping the Faith* (2000) comes to a climax when Father Brian Finn (Edward Norton) makes Rabbi Jake Schram (Ben Stiller) realize that he should not be standing around when a high-powered shiksa businesswoman who is their childhood friend, Anna Riley (Jenna Elfman), is about to leave forever (“It’s a very simple situation: you’re in love with her, she’s in love with you, and she is leaving in about two hours,” Finn tells him).⁴³

Fight Club is a little, but not much, different. The film comes to a climax when the narrator realizes that he does not have a better-looking roommate and that he likes Marla after all. “I’ve come to realize something very, very important,” he tells her. “The full extent of our relationship wasn’t really clear to me up until now,” he says. “What I’ve come to realize is that I really like you, Marla,” he says. (Fincher said that this scene was rewritten and reshot so that the narrator was less “coy” and more forceful.⁴⁴) What is unusual in this case is that

think that *The Incredibly True of Adventure of Two Girls in Love* is actually a fairly reliable indicator of what features are standard for the genre *romantic comedy*.

⁴³ *Keeping the Faith* was directed by Edward Norton and written by Stuart Blumberg, who had a small part in *Fight Club*.

⁴⁴ “Commentary: David Fincher.”

the narrator tries to send Marla away, but he is doing that to protect her from him and from the bad things that he knows are about to happen.

5.4. Happy ending

A few romantic comedies do not end with the romantic leads ending up together. For example, Ann and Joe do not end up together in *Roman Holiday*. She resumes her royal duties, and he leaves her final press conference in Rome alone. (Still, in a scene that is echoed in *Notting Hill*, she says at that press conference that she enjoyed her visit to Rome most of all.) But almost all romantic comedies end with the romantic leads ending up together. This is also a standard feature of the genre *romantic comedy*, what James Harvey (1998: 313) calls “the conventional windup bringing hero and heroine together.” But what the romantic leads do when they end up together is a variable feature of the genre. Usually, they kiss. For example, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* ends with Carrie and Charles embracing passionately in a thunderstorm. But sometimes they do something a little more demure. For example, *Sleepless in Seattle* ends with Annie and Sam holding hands in an elevator at the top of the Empire State Building as the doors close in front of them. And *Notting Hill* ends with Anna—who is now pregnant—and William on a park bench, their fingers intertwined, she gazing off into the distance and resting her head on his lap, he reading *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*.

Fight Club is no different. The film ends with Marla and the narrator holding hands and looking at each other as buildings implode in front of them. “Trust me. Everything’s going to be fine. You met me at a very strange time in

my life," he says. This is, I think, a straightforwardly happy ending. Palahniuk disagrees. He thinks that the only happy ending is death.⁴⁵ But, if so, then tragedies like Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) would have happy endings, whereas comedies like Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night: Or What You Will* (1996) would have unhappy endings, in which case *Fight Club's* not having a happy ending would not mean that it is not a romantic comedy.

Palahniuk points out that the "romantic ending" is "truncate[d]" by an intercut image of a penis.⁴⁶ But that does not mean that the ending is not really romantic. The intercut image of a penis is a self-referential gag, like showing a changeover dot in the upper right-hand corner of the screen in a scene in which Tyler points to that part of the screen and explains what a changeover dot is ("In the industry, we call them 'cigarette burns'"); showing sprockets in a scene in which Tyler says, "We are the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world" and again in a flashback to that scene in which the narrator says the line; the narrator's talking about changeovers when he has just realized that he does not have a better-looking roommate ("It's called a 'changeover'. The movie goes on, and nobody in the audience has any idea"); or Tyler's mentioning "flashback humor" in a scene at the end of the film that continues the flashback that the film begins with. Sometimes these gags are clues to what is not really real: there is no guy who is about to become the narrator's better-looking roommate and who explains what a changeover dot is, and the narrator does not have a better-

⁴⁵ "Commentary: Chuck Palahniuk and Jim Uhls."

⁴⁶ "Commentary: Chuck Palahniuk and Jim Uhls."

looking roommate who says, “We are the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world.” But sometimes they are merely gags: the narrator really does say, “We are the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world,” he really does realize that he does not have a better-looking roommate, and the scene at the end of the film really does continue a flashback that the film begins with. The intercut image of a penis is, I think, merely one of those gags. (Uhls had originally intended the image of a penis to be intercut, from the narrator’s point of view, in a scene in which his boss is talking.⁴⁷)

Palahniuk also points out that the narrator still has to deal with his acolytes, the Space Monkeys (each of whom is “like a monkey ready to be shot into space, a space monkey ready to sacrifice himself for the greater good”), who are determined to carry out their destructive missions, even in the face of the narrator’s explicit orders to stop. This, I think, is one of the two biggest problems with the view that *Fight Club* is correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*. (The other problem, which I discuss below in Section 7, is the violence.) But maybe the acolytes are not such a problem. Maybe, once the buildings have been blown up, they do not have further havoc to wreak. Maybe how to deal with the acolytes is merely one of those details that is not explicitly resolved in the film but will get resolved somehow, like how Annie and Sam will decide whether to live in Baltimore or in Seattle in *Sleepless in Seattle* or how Evie and Randy will

⁴⁷ “Commentary: Chuck Palahniuk and Jim Uhls.”

deal with Evie's irate mother and Randy's irate aunt in *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*.

One might also think that, because the narrator is psychotic and Marla is suicidal, they are doomed. Although they might not seem well suited, Uhls said that their relationship "in fact does work for them."⁴⁸ In many romantic comedies the romantic leads are well suited in the film, even if people like them would be ill suited in real life. This might be a standard feature of the genre *romantic comedy*. For example, an American movie star with a bit of a temper and a British bookseller with a bit of a stammer are well suited in *Notting Hill* (1999), even if in real life they would not be. Richard Curtis, the writer, described the film as "a concealed fairy tale—the Princess & the Woodcutter as it were."⁴⁹ He said that, "by the end of writing the film, I think I'd started to believe it myself, that it was absolutely possible for just some guy to stay cool in the face of a huge star, and for things to work out."⁵⁰ He eventually came to his senses, though. "But don't be taken in," he said.⁵¹ Really, it is all a "big lie."⁵² And Sally Albright (Meg Ryan), who is "cheerful and chirpy and relentlessly, pointlessly, unrealistically, idiotically optimistic" ("Basically, I'm a happy person. And I don't see that there's anything wrong with that") and Harry Burns (Billy Crystal), who is "the prince of darkness, the master of the worst-case scenario," "bleak and depressed"

⁴⁸ Quoted in Sragow 1999.

⁴⁹ Curtis 1999: 13.

⁵⁰ Curtis 1999: 13.

⁵¹ Curtis 1999: 13.

⁵² Curtis 1999: 17.

(“When I buy a new book, I always read the last page first. That way, in case I die before I finish, I know how it ends”), get together after years of being friends and are well suited in *When Harry Met Sally ...* (1989).⁵³ But Nora Ephron, the writer, pointed out that in real life people do not usually get together after years of being friends. “If you wanted to be honest about it, these things usually don’t happen that way. ... It’s probably not going to work,” she said.⁵⁴ And Carrie Fisher pointed out that in real life people like Sally and Harry are not well suited for each other. “They seem to be suited. But, really, in terms of statistics? Divorce,” she said.⁵⁵

6. The features considerations II: mood or tone

When it comes to standard features, I am mainly interested in plot. But there is more to genre than plot. As Noel Carroll (1982: 104) notes in criticizing Stanley Cavell’s (1981) plot-based account of the genre *Hollywood comedy of remarriage*, “Genres seem to share more than plots; they share characters, moods, settings, tempos, scenes, tones, possibly themes or allegorical subject matter, perhaps actors and their associated qualities, etc.” I cannot here do justice to all of the rich texture of the genre *romantic comedy*.⁵⁶ But there is a mood or tone that is standard

⁵³ The descriptions of Sally and Harry come from Ephron 2004: x.

⁵⁴ Quoted in *How Harry Met Sally ...* (2000), a documentary included on the 2001 DVD of *When Harry Met Sally ...*.

⁵⁵ Quoted in *How Harry Met Sally ...*.

⁵⁶ One topic to explore would be the connection between Marla and Audrey Hepburn. Palahniuk described Marla as “Audrey Hepburn on heroin.” See “Commentary: Chuck Palahniuk and Jim Uhls.”

for the genre and that is often evidenced in antagonistic but witty banter. *Fight Club* shares the antagonistic but witty banter and this mood or tone. Given the features consideration, this also tells substantially in favor of the film's being correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*.

In some romantic comedies, the romantic leads get along just fine. For example, in *Notting Hill*, although Anna Scott (Julia Roberts) has a bit of a temper, she and William Thacker (Hugh Grant), "get on very well," in the words of his Welsh roommate Spike (Rhys Ifans). (Spike mentions this as evidence that William has a "nice opportunity to ... slip her one.") But, in many romantic comedies, there is a certain friction or antagonism between the romantic leads, at least until they realize that they are really made for each other. This is a standard feature of the genre *romantic comedy*. For example, in *When Harry Met Sally ...*, Harry explains to Sally why he never takes anyone to the airport at the beginning of a relationship.

HARRY: Because eventually things move on and you don't take someone to the airport, and I never wanted anyone to say to me, "How come you never take me to the airport anymore?"

SALLY: It's amazing. You look like a normal person but actually you are the Angel of Death.

Years later, when Sally sees Harry in a bookstore, she describes him to her friend Marie (Carrie Fisher) as "obnoxious."

MARIE: This is just like in the movies. Remember in *The Lady Vanishes* when she says to him, "You are the most obnoxious man I have ever met" —

SALLY (*correcting her*): "The most contemptible."

MARIE (*continuing*): —and they fall madly in love.⁵⁷

And, in *You've Got Mail* (1998), when one of the owners of the chain that has just opened up a megastore near a small bookstore on the Upper West Side that it will soon put out of business, Joe Fox (Tom Hanks), shows up for a date with someone he met online, he realizes that his date is with Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan), the woman he is about to put out of business. She complains that, when they first met in her bookstore, he did not tell her that he was her competition.

KATHLEEN: You lied to me.

JOE: I didn't lie to you.

KATHLEEN: You did too.

JOE: No, I didn't.

KATHLEEN: Yes, you did.

JOE: I did not.

KATHLEEN: You did too.

JOE: I did not.

KATHLEEN: You did too.

JOE: I did not.

KATHLEEN: Yeah, you did too.

She goes on to tell him that his store is a “theme park, multi-level, homogenized mochaccino-land.” “You’ve deluded yourself into thinking that you’re some sort of benefactor. But no one will ever remember you, Joe,” she says. “You are nothing but a suit.”

Fight Club is no different. Marla and the narrator express disdain for each other. “If I did have a tumor, I’d call it ‘Marla’,” he tells us in a voiceover near the

⁵⁷ In *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), a British woman who is going home to get married, Iris Henderson (Margaret Lockwood), says to a bow-tied ethnomusicologist who is threatening to share her digs for the night, Gilbert (Michael Redgrave), “You’re the most contemptible person I’ve ever met in all my life.” “Confidentially, I think you’re a bit of a stinker, too,” he replies.

beginning of the film. "You're intolerable," she tells him near the end of the film. And they engage in antagonistic but witty banter. When they first speak, the narrator, who goes by different names at different support groups, confronts her.

THE NARRATOR: I've seen you. I saw you at melanoma. I saw you at tuberculosis. I saw you at testicular cancer.

MARLA: I saw you practicing this.

THE NARRATOR: Practicing what?

MARLA: Telling me off. Is it going as well as you hoped, Rupert?

After they work out who gets to go to which support group, she takes her leave.

MARLA: Looks like this is goodbye.

THE NARRATOR: Well, let's not make a big thing out of it, okay?

MARLA: How's this for not making a big thing? (*She walks out.*)

Weeks later, she calls him.

THE NARRATOR: I'm just on my way out.

MARLA: Me, too. I've got a stomach full of Xanax.

THE NARRATOR: So you're staying in tonight, then?

Later, at his place, she approaches him wearing a dress.

MARLA: It's a bridesmaid's dress. Someone loved it intensely for one day then tossed it ... like a sex-crime victim, underwear inside out, bound with electrical tape.

THE NARRATOR: Well, then, it suits you.

MARLA: You can borrow it sometime.

On a subsequent occasion she asks him to come over to her place to give her a breast exam. She thanks him when he has finished.

MARLA: I wish I could return the favor.

THE NARRATOR: There's not a lot of breast cancer in the men in my family.

MARLA: Could check your prostate.

When she kisses him on the side of the mouth, the narrator asks, “Are we done?”

According to Harvey (1998: 107), it is this “combination of love and toughness” that was new in the films that define the genre *romantic comedy* as it emerged in Hollywood in 1934. These films, including *It Happened One Night* (1934), feature a “new kind of energy,” something “slangy, combative, humorous, unsentimental—and powerfully romantic.”⁵⁸ The energy between Marla and the narrator is, I think, slangy, combative, humorous, and unsentimental in this way.

7. The features consideration III: contra-standard features

There is a lot of male-on-male pugilism and urban terrorism in *Fight Club*. This sort of thing does not usually happen in romantic comedies. For example, in *Sleepless in Seattle*, Sam does not pummel his brother-in-law, Greg (Victor Garber), to bits, and Annie and Sam do not watch the Empire State Building collapse. Pugilism and terrorism are contra-standard relative to the genre *romantic comedy*. Granted, there are a few other romantic comedies with violence in them. For example, in *Punch-Drunk Love* (2002), Barry Egan (Adam Sandler) brawls with thugs from a phone sex line. And, in *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005), John and Jane Smith (Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie) try to kill each other. But these films are exceptional, and if they are correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy* it is despite the violence in them. Ordinarily, a film with as much

⁵⁸ Harvey 1998: 108.

pugilism and terrorism as *Fight Club* would not be correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*. So what is it about *Fight Club* that allows it to be correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy* despite the contra-standard pugilism and terrorism?

In *Fight Club*, the terrorism is really about something more familiar in romantic comedies: a girl. Or so the narrator tells us at the beginning of the film. “And, suddenly, I realize that all of this—the gun, the bombs, the revolution—has got something to do with a girl named ‘Marla Singer,’” he says. It is difficult to say what, exactly, the pugilism of *Fight Club* or the terrorism of *Project Mayhem* has to do with Marla Singer. But here is a hypothesis. The narrator created a macho persona because he thinks adopting that persona will help him get Marla. Unfortunately, the macho persona that he created is insane; and, as a result, people get beaten up and things get blown up. The timing fits. It is only after he meets Marla that the narrator thinks that he meets a soap salesman by the name of ‘Tyler Durden’ on a plane. (We see images of Pitt for one frame before the narrator meets Marla. But, except for the flashback that the film opens with, the first time that Pitt appears on screen for more than one frame is when we see him in an airport as the narrator passes by. This is just after the narrator has talked to Marla for the first time.) Tyler suggests that the narrator created a macho persona because he thought that adopting that persona would make him seem more attractive. “All the ways you wish you could be, that’s me. I look like you wanna look, I f--k like you wanna f--k. I am smart, capable, and, most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not,” he says to the narrator.

Fincher suggested that the narrator created a macho persona to deal with Marla. He said that, in the “subliminal Brads,” Tyler looks like he is telling the narrator, “I can solve a lot of these problems for you.”⁵⁹ One of these problems is probably Marla, since the last time a single-frame image of Pitt appears is when Marla, who the narrator has yet to talk to, is walking away from a support group. And Bonham Carter said that the narrator created a macho persona to deal with, and be with, Marla. She said, “I think Marla—definitely if it was not for Marla, Tyler would not be engendered and that the need to invent Tyler comes from meeting Marla; or, in confronting Marla, somebody who he could possibly have a relationship with, he’s too scared and retreats and invents this character that he feels could have a relationship rather than himself.”⁶⁰ And this macho persona is insane. Fincher described Tyler as the “insane, you know, hyper-stylized masculine side” of the narrator.⁶¹ Adopting a hyper-stylized masculine persona might be a good way to get Marla. Adopting an insanely masculine persona is a good way to beat people up and blow things up. If this hypothesis is correct, then *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem* are merely byproducts of the narrator’s attempt to get the girl.

⁵⁹ “Commentary: David Fincher.”

⁶⁰ “Commentary: David Fincher, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton & Helena Bonham Carter.”

⁶¹ “Commentary: David Fincher.”

8. The evaluation consideration

When *Fight Club* is perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*, the film seems to have an aesthetic vice: the second half of the film seems somewhat slow, since it is focused on pugilism and terrorism, which are at best byproducts of the narrator's attempt to get Marla. But, when it is perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*, *Fight Club* seems to have an aesthetic virtue: the film seems clever in a way that exploits its key variation on the genre. *Fight Club* does not seem clever in this way when it is perceived in the genre *drama* or *dark comedy*. Given the evaluation consideration, this tells in favor of *Fight Club's* being correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*.

Fight Club's key variation on the genre, recall, is that it features an inverted case of mistaken identity that does not rely on amnesia and in which the audience does not know what a character does not know. It is this variation that allows the film to fool the audience about just what kind of romantic comedy it is watching. And, for those of us who like to be fooled fairly, that is aesthetically a good thing.

Almost all romantic comedies end with the romantic leads ending up together after having overcome some obstacles. Ephron has distinguished two kinds of romantic comedy.⁶² In a gentile romantic comedy, the main obstacle is "external": there is a third party, say.⁶³ For example, in *Sleepless in Seattle*, one of

⁶² Quoted in *How Harry Met Sally ...* .

⁶³ In *How Harry Met Sally ...* , Reiner says that in *When Harry Met Sally ...* there are no "external obstacles."

the main obstacles to Annie and Sam's ending up together—other than the fact that she lives in Baltimore, he lives in Seattle, and they have never met—is that Annie is engaged to Walter (Bill Pullman) and that Sam is dating Victoria (Barbara Garrick). And, in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, one of the main obstacles to Carrie and Charles's ending up together is that she is engaged and then married to an older Scottish politician, Hamish (Corin Redgrave) and that he is engaged to an ex-girlfriend, Henrietta (Anna Chancellor). In a Jewish romantic comedy, by contrast, the main obstacle is “internal”: one of the parties—typically a guy—is neurotic, say.⁶⁴ Just about every Woody Allen film is an example of this. And, although Sally and Harry are occasionally married to or dating other people in *When Harry Met Sally ...*, Rob Reiner, the director, said that the main obstacle to their ending up together is their own shtick, their own “*Sturm und Drang*.”⁶⁵

In *Fight Club*, it seems that Tyler is the main obstacle to Marla and the narrator's ending up together. But it turns out that Tyler *is* the narrator. So what at first appears to be an external obstacle—a third party—turns out to be an internal obstacle: a psychosis of one of the parties. Along these lines, Uhls thought of *Fight Club* as a romantic comedy that is about something internal to the characters: their psychologies. After saying that the film is a romantic comedy, Uhls said,

⁶⁴ In *How Harry Met Sally ...*, Fischer says that the obstacles in *When Harry Met Sally ...* are “all internal.”

⁶⁵ Quoted in *How Harry Met Sally ...*.

It has to do with the characters' attitudes toward a healthy relationship, which is a lot of behavior which *seems* unhealthy and harsh to each other, but in fact does work for them—because both characters are out on the edge psychologically.⁶⁶

(Fincher described their relationship a little more bluntly: “She’s trying to make this work, and this guy is so nuts.”⁶⁷) When it is perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*, *Fight Club* at first seems to be a gentile romantic comedy but turns out to be a Jewish romantic comedy instead. That is rather clever.

Perceiving *Fight Club* in the genre *romantic comedy* is not like perceiving *Artificial Intelligence* in the genre *film developed by two famous directors, one famous for being dark, the other famous for being sentimental, where the point is to confuse the audience about which director is responsible for which part*. For *romantic comedy* is an established genre (see Section 3) and Uhls at least thought of *Fight Club* as a romantic comedy (see Section 4). So that *Artificial Intelligence* seems good when it is perceived in the *film developed by two famous directors* genre in ways that it does not when it is perceived in many other genres does not tell in favor of its being correctly perceived in that genre; whereas there is no such reason to think that *Fight Club*'s seeming clever when it is perceived in the genre *romantic comedy* in a way in which it does not when it is perceived in many other genres does not tell in favor of the film's being correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Sragow 1999; italics in original.

⁶⁷ “Commentary: David Fincher.”

9. Conclusion

The screenwriter of *Fight Club* thought of the film as a romantic comedy. The film contains several plot elements that are standard, and has a mood or tone that is standard, for the genre *romantic comedy*. And, when it is perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*, the film seems clever in a way that it does not when it is perceived in many other genres. Following Walton, these considerations all tell in favor of *Fight Club's* being correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*. Given the genre reality claim, which aesthetic properties a work of art has depends on which genre it is correctly perceived in. So knowing that *Fight Club* is correctly perceived in the genre *romantic comedy* puts us in a better position to figure out which aesthetic properties the film really does have. In particular, since the film appears to be a bit boring in the second half when it is perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*, and since the film is correctly perceived in that genre, the film really is a bit boring in the second half. More importantly, since *Fight Club* appears to be rather clever when it is perceived in the genre *romantic comedy*, and since the film is correctly perceived in that genre, the film really is rather clever.

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