

“They Only See What They Want To See.”
Narrative Strategies in Films with Ontological Revelations

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ABSTRACT

“They Only See What They Want To See:”
Narrative Strategies in Films with Ontological Revelations

Dylan Reibling

A number of films in recent years have presented characters whose state of existence is proven – by the end of the film – to be different than what the spectator may have originally assumed. Three films that display this feature – *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* – disclose the information regarding the characters’ ontological status in a single, revelatory moment. This study examines the narrative strategies that these films employ in terms of character presentation and event presentation in order to accomplish these ontological revelations. These tactics of narrative presentation are then compared and analysed in order to find out how they epistemologically position the film spectator.

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To Mom and Dad.

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Introduction

Recent years have seen the emergence of a popular cycle of films whose narratives challenge traditional notions of character in film. Films such as M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999), David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001), Cameron Crowe's *Vanilla Sky* (2001) and James Mangold's *Identity* (2003) all share a distinctive unifying narrative feature in terms of their treatment of character. All of these films present the spectator with characters whose nature of existence is proven, by the end of the film, to be different than what the spectator may have originally assumed. In many of these films, this change of the characters' nature takes the form of a sudden disclosure of narrative information: a revelatory moment in which the characters' true ontological status is unveiled. A further principle these films share in common is that, in most cases, the ontological revelation occurs for both the spectator and the characters themselves. In the revelatory moment, both the spectators' assumptions regarding the character as well as the characters' assumptions regarding themselves are definitively proven to be false.

These films are of interest for film theorists because they utilize careful and exact narrative strategies in order to achieve the ontological revelation. These narrative strategies are designed to take advantage of the viewing habits and assumptions that the spectator automatically engages when encountering a film. A study of the narrative strategies employed by these films can help to elucidate the intricacies and sophistication necessary for the ontological revelation to occur. By examining the nature, organization, patterns and function of these narratives, it is possible to come to a better understanding of how these texts work toward creating the ontological revelation. This study will be

composed of a close examination of the narrative techniques employed by three films—*The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club*—that accomplish this operative principle. In doing so, the similarities and differences of their approach will help us come to an understanding of the mechanics involved in the ontological revelation.

Chapter 1: Event Presentation

Systematicity

When approaching the presentation of events in these particular ontological revelation films, one of the first things that is striking about them is that, on the surface, they appear to be ordinary and conventional. *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* all present narrative events in a relatively straightforward and comprehensible manner. These films do not organize their narratives in any way that would seem to set them apart as particularly unique from films that do not contain ontological revelations. One of the clearest ways in which these films seem to obey the conventions of classical narrative texts is that all of these films possess one of the key attributes of a narrative text: systematicity. For a text's structure to possess the attribute of systematicity, it must adhere to the tenet that "the fundamental property of a story (in the narratological sense) is that it consists of a series of a connected events" (*Coming to Terms* 109-110). A systematic text is one whose events are interdependent on each other. We ordinarily identify this interdependence of events in a classical narrative as an organized chain composed of a beginning, middle and an end.

All three of these components that constitute narrative systematicity can be found in *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club*. Each film has identifiable beginnings, middles and ends. *The Others* begins at the wealthy country estate of a woman, Grace (played by Nicole Kidman), as she hires three servants—matronly housemaid Bertha Mills (Fionnula Flanagan), soft-spoken gardener Mr. Tuttle (Eric Sykes) and mute handmaid Lydia (Elaine Cassidy)—to tend to the house and her children, Anne (Alakina Mann) and Nicholas (James Bentley). The middle of the film focuses on the relationships

between Grace, her children, and these new servants as they encounter a set of strange occurrences that suggest the possibility of the mansion being haunted by otherworldly presences. The film ends with an explanation as to why the inhabitants of the house have been encountering these disturbances. *The Sixth Sense* begins when a child psychiatrist, Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis), and his loving wife Anna (Olivia Williams) are confronted in their bedroom by a former patient, Vincent (Donnie Wahlberg). The opening scene features Vincent—who claims not to have been cured by Malcolm—brandishing a handgun and threatening Malcolm and Anna before shooting Malcolm in the abdomen and then committing suicide. The film’s middle section is composed of Malcolm’s attempts to redeem himself and his failures through his work with a young boy, Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment), who suffers from the same psychosis as Vincent. The film ends with Malcolm finding a way to help Cole deal with his affliction. *Fight Club* begins with a nameless man (performed by Edward Norton and listed in the credits only as “Narrator,” but who shall be referred to as Jack in order to avoid any confusion that could be caused by our narratological approach) being held at gunpoint by another man, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt). As a voiceover narrator, Jack guides us—through flashback—to what he deems to be a more proper beginning. The beginning to which Jack leads the spectator is one where he joins peer support groups to deal with his case of insomnia. The middle section of *Fight Club* continues to follow Jack as he meets Tyler, an eccentric anarchist with whom Jack finds ways of escaping the banality of his consumerist lifestyle. The film ends with the consequences of the counter-cultural activities of Tyler and Jack.

Problematic Systematicities

Although these films may vary slightly in the exact manner in which their beginnings, middles and ends are presented (these issues of plotting and temporality will be dealt with later), it is notable that all of them contain stories that appear to have the semblance of coherent systems with discernible beginnings, middles and ends. Upon closer inspection, however, it can be seen that the systematicity of each film is just a surface attribute. Beneath this ostensible systematicity, these films feature sets of internal structural relationships that are highly problematic.

Nowhere can this problematic systematicity be better seen than in *The Others*, a film whose allegedly intelligible beginning, middle and end are constantly disputed throughout the narrative. The opening of the film, in which Grace hires Bertha, Mr. Tuttle and Lydia, appears to act as the beginning of the story. However, several narrative cues are in place which indicate that this is not the case. Although Grace is initially suspicious of the three supplicants, she immediately ushers them into the house and employs them. Grace announces that her reason for employing them so quickly is due to the mysterious disappearance of her entire staff earlier that week. This is the first cue that signals the problematic systematicity of the text of *The Others*: an initial event that is obviously important to the narrative (the disappearance of the servants) has been elided from the narrative structure. Thus, the true beginning of the story is left out of the narrative. Although this may seem like a minor omission in the first part of the film, the importance of these events becomes increasingly apparent as the film progresses. During breakfast one morning, Bertha overhears Anne alluding to an enigmatic *something* that happened just before the previous servants disappeared. Bertha is immediately intrigued by the

mention of these missing events, much in the same way that the spectator—also without knowledge of these events—would find their curiosity piqued by such an enigmatic insinuation. Bertha asks Anne to elaborate but Nicholas interjects, denying that this mysterious event happened. Anne and Nicholas argue about the event and are interrupted by Grace, who takes Bertha aside and instructs her to not entertain any of the children's fantasies. The result of this interruption is that both Bertha and the spectator are prevented from receiving details about this important event that preceded the beginning of the narrative. The referencing of an important (but missing) beginning event occurs again later in the film when Grace's husband Charles (Christopher Eccleston) returns from the war. Charles confronts Grace about this mysterious event by saying "Anne told me what happened" and then demands that Grace supply an explanation of the important event. Once again, the specific details of this beginning event are omitted. The only information offered by Grace is that she couldn't handle either the servants or her emotions after Charles left. This scene is crosscut to feature segments of a conversation between Anne and Nicholas about the mysterious day in question. While the children's comments do not add any concrete evidence about the events of that day, they strongly suggest that Grace's inability to cope with the stress of running the house culminated in an episode of erratic behaviour. Furthermore, this erratic behaviour is somehow linked to both the disappearance of the servants and the appearance of ghostly presences in the house. The end result of scenes such as these is that the spectator is given just enough information to realize that there was an important initiating event that preceded the beginning events of the film without that initiating event being revealed. This overall strategy of omitting an important beginning event from the story, yet repeatedly alluding

to it as a crucial event in the cause and effect chain problematizes the systematicity of *The Others*. The spectator is not given access to what can truly be called the beginning event of the narrative system.

This type of troubled systematicity can also be found in *The Sixth Sense*, albeit in a slightly different manner. Instead of omitting a logical beginning in the series of events, this film deletes a critical event in the middle of the narrative. At the beginning of the film, Malcolm and Anna's return from a celebratory municipal event held in Malcolm's honour is interrupted by Vincent's violent intrusion. Immediately after Vincent shoots Malcolm and commits suicide—a critical juncture in the story—the film suddenly jumps ahead to a later date with a fade to black and an intertitle that reads "Later That Fall." The scene immediately following this intertitle shows Malcolm, apparently uninjured, sitting in a park and waiting for the arrival of his newest patient, Cole. The ellipses of what one assumes would be a major event in the life of the protagonist—the aftermath of a gunshot wound—is completely removed from the narrative. This is a major omission from the narrative systematicity of the film: a significant middle event is noticeably absent. To add further narrative importance to the events that occurred within this fissure, there is a noticeable change in the relationship between Malcolm and Anna following the ellipsis. Whereas before the leap forward in time, the two were shown to be very affectionate and loving, afterward they do not speak to each other and are rarely even seen in the same room. Further evidence of a drastic change in their relationship is Anna's increasing flirtatious relationship with her co-worker. No diegetic reason is given which would explain this sudden change in either of these relationships. Thus, the spectator is forced to assume that an important event—one that could explain the transformation in Malcolm

and Anna's relationship—took place during the ellipsis. The absence of this event calls the spectator's attention to the fact that the systematicity of the film is problematic.

Much in the same way that *The Sixth Sense* problematizes textual systematicity by leaving out events from the middle of a narrative, so too does *Fight Club*. In *Fight Club*, Jack builds a close friendship with Tyler, moving into Tyler's dilapidated shack after his condominium is unexpectedly decimated. As their friendship progresses, the two men bemoan the lifestyle-focused culture in which they exist. In their attempts to counteract this state of affairs they eventually form an underground "fight club," in which people participate in amicable, yet still physically harmful fistfights. Almost imperceptibly, these fight clubs slowly evolve into vigilante groups. When recruits start showing up at the house to join Tyler's Space Monkey army, Jack realizes that he has been unaware of many of the intermediate events that led to the founding of this army. These events have also been hidden from the spectator, who has as little information about these events as does Jack. The realisation that events are missing from the middle of the narrative is further emphasised when the recruits return home with the corpse of Jack's friend Bob, who had been killed during a vigilante mission. At this point, the recruits mention that they were partaking in a plan entitled Project Mayhem. The existence of a Project Mayhem is new information to both Jack and the spectator, neither of whom had been privy to any information regarding the devising and implementation of this secret strategy. As such, the fact that the narrative system is missing middle events is made obvious to the spectator. This situation of missing middle events in *Fight Club* is similar to the missing middle events in *The Sixth Sense* except that the number of events skipped

is greatly increased in *Fight Club*. Thus, just as *The Sixth Sense* suffers from a problematic systematicity, so too does *Fight Club*.

Event Omission

It is important to note that the problematic nature of the systems of these films is not just a product of events being omitted from the narrative. Various events are omitted from every narrative text. Due to its finite nature, a narrative text can never be complete. This is because “the number of plausible intermediate actions or properties is virtually infinite” (*Story and Discourse* 29). Selections have to be made amongst the infinitely expansive set of events in a narrative in order to present the story as a finite end product. Although this may be the case, however, it does not necessarily follow that every narrative’s systematicity is problematic. Some details are simply extraneous to the narrative, and their omission does not affect the structure of the narrative in any way.

Gaps in Causality

In the case of these particular films with ontological revelations, however, a strong argument could be made that the events left out can be considered as important beginnings, middles and ends in the narrative systems of the stories. In *The Others*, the omission of the mysterious event that preceded the opening of the film has narrative importance in relation to the events of the film as they unfold. The characters’ constant references to the missing beginning event wherein Grace was behaving erratically and the servants disappeared, coupled with the suggestion that this event is linked to the occurrences of ghostly phenomena, gives these missing narrative events significant

weight. Their absence makes the story incomplete, as if the film were missing its proper beginning. In contrast to events missing from *The Others*, the events omitted from *The Sixth Sense* seem to be much less important to the central plotline (that of the relationship between Malcolm and Cole). Rather, these missing events mostly concern Malcolm's emotional disposition as well as the emotional relationship between Malcolm and his wife Anna. Despite Malcolm and Anna's relationship being shunted aside from the plot's centre of gravity, the distinct emotional impact that the omitted events have had on Malcolm leaves a marked gap that inspires curiosity as to the nature of these events. The narrative can be interpreted as lacking a crucial middle. *Fight Club*, while multiplying the number of events missing from the film, also takes the importance of the missing events a step further than *The Sixth Sense*. Unable to find Tyler, Jack immediately embarks on a cross-country search in order to gather information regarding the events of which he was unaware. The urgency of Jack's mission acts as a clear indicator to the spectator of the importance of these events that took place but were missing from the narrative. These missing events are crucial for understanding how Tyler built up his vigilante militia. Without the presence of these important middle events in the film, the direction and scope of the army and its direction/initiatives is unknown and subsequently very alarming to both Jack and the spectator. It can be seen, then, that in the case of all of these films, the missing events are not at all extraneous to the narrative. The relevance of the omitted events is so overwhelming that the narratives' systematicities threaten to collapse unless the events are revealed or an explanation as to what was omitted is given. For an understanding of why these missing events are so crucial to these films, it is important to look at the functions that are left unfulfilled by these lacunae.

As part of a communicative text, the systematic pattern of a recognizable beginning, middle and end in narrative texts is a manifestation of a deeper functional structure at work: that of causality. Narratology places an emphasis on the idea that narrative events “are radically correlative, enchaining, entailing...not simply linear but causative” (*Story and Discourse* 45). For narratives, this implies that the designations of *beginning*, *middle*, and *end* are assigned to different parts of the narrative based on their systematic relationship to each other. Furthermore, these relationships are not arbitrary. They require a special kind of organization of events in which “some person, object or situation undergoes a particular type of change and this change is measured by a sequence of attributions which apply to the thing at different times” (Branigan 4). This kind of relationship between elements is one of logical transformations—a relationship between the events which transcends the base connectivity of linear succession. Indeed, “events in the narrative (as opposed to the chance compilation) tend to be related or mutually entailing” (*Story and Discourse* 21).

This aspect of narratives being comprised of logical, entailing, causal transformations explains why the systematicities of *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* can be viewed as problematic. Not only do these films omit certain events, but they omit important events that constitute part of the chain of causal chain of the narrative. In *The Others*, the events that were omitted from the beginning of the film hold the key to the resolution of the enigma of the ghostly occurrences in the house. In a monologue at the end of the film, Grace finally recounts the events that had been excised from the beginning of the film. She describes smothering the children with a pillow and then, out of shock and grief over these murders, committing suicide with a shotgun blast

to the forehead. This narrative information is crucial to the causal structure of the film. When this information is relayed to the spectator, the explanation for the appearance of ghostly apparitions can be considered fully tendered. Upon the release of this information, it can be understood that Grace and the children were the actual spirits haunting the house. The strange occurrences that they had assumed to be caused by ghostly presences were, in fact, the presences of the actual live inhabitants of the house as manifested in the spirit world of Grace and the others. Had the information about the murder of the children and the suicide of Grace been included in the beginning of the narrative, the film's causal system would have been much less problematic. The cause of the disappearance of the servants and the appearance of ghostly presences could have been seen as the result of Grace and the children passing from the world of the living to the world of the dead.

In a similar manner, the events omitted from *The Sixth Sense* are revealed to be an important part of the causal system of the narrative. At the moment of the ontological revelation, enough narrative information is given for both Malcolm and the spectator to realize that Malcolm is, in fact, a ghost. This information culminates in a revisitation of the scene where Vincent shoots Malcolm. When this scene is re-played, it continues past its original ending of Malcolm lying on the bed. By doing so, the full extent of the damage inflicted by the gunshot is revealed. The spectator watches Malcolm die. At this point, the spectator is cued to the fact that the narrative information elided in the film's ellipsis was Malcolm's death. This is a key causal component in the narrative, which has major ramifications for the spectator's understanding of the text. First of all, these narrative events give the spectator enough information to understand the sudden

alienation that characterizes the relationship of Malcolm and Anna in the latter half of the film. The lack of physical interaction between Malcolm and Anna as well as their inability to speak to each other is not the result of any emotional turmoil. Rather, these situations are the result of Malcolm's (non)existence as a ghostly presence. Secondly, the omitted events provide causal information about the nature of the relationship between Malcolm and Cole. As a person endowed with the distinctive ability to see, hear and interact with the spirits of dead people, Cole is one of the only persons with whom Malcolm *could* have a relationship following his death. However, the causal reasons for the relationship between Malcolm and Cole are much more complex and multi-layered than this simple matter of Cole being one of the only living persons with whom the ghost of Malcolm could have a relationship. When the information about what happened in the missing section of the film—Malcolm's death—is revealed, the truly symbiotic nature of their relationship can be understood. Instead of being merely a matter of a psychologist being assigned to the case of Cole and his "possible mood disorders," it becomes apparent that both Malcolm and Cole offer assistance to the other. As a doctor who had previously dealt with Vincent, a person with the same gift as Cole, Malcolm had enough experience and emotional investment in Cole's disorder to be able to take the leap of faith and believe in Cole's assertions of seeing ghosts. Due to this belief, Malcolm is able to deduce the best way for Cole to deal with the ghostly presences that approach him. Malcolm suggests that Cole listen to the spirits in order to help them resolve the personal issues that keep them haunting the corporeal world. In finding a way for Cole to deal with the ghostly presences that he sees, Malcolm overcomes one of his own reasons for remaining on earth: his guilt over his inability to help Vincent through the same traumatic

state that afflicts Cole. However, there is another ramification of Malcolm's assistance to Cole. When he gives Cole the tools to deal with the apparitions, Malcolm inadvertently enables Cole to help Malcolm himself. The newly empowered Cole helps Malcolm by suggesting a way for him to communicate with Anna. By talking to Anna in her sleep as Cole suggests, Malcolm discovers that their emotional distance is the result of his passing away rather than any negligence on his part. It is this realisation that allows Malcolm to overcome a second reason for remaining in the world of the living and subsequently leave the corporeal world. Thus, it can be seen that Malcolm and Cole had come together to form a relationship for many complicated and interrelated reasons. Had Malcolm's death not been omitted from the text, there would have been enough causal information for the complexity of the Malcolm-Cole relationship to be understood from the beginning.

The events omitted from *Fight Club* also stand out as being important elements in the causal structure of the film. Since the events that are missing deal with Tyler's counter-cultural work in building the militia, therefore the true nature of the militia—its goals and principles—are unclear. The spectator is unaware of the actions taken and the future plans of the vigilante army much in the same way that Jack is unaware of them. Due to the absence of explanatory causal information, there is no way of knowing how the militia will evolve. Although this uncertainty casts a shadow of confusion over the nature of the army, the effect is a minor one compared to a much greater consequence of removing these missing causal events from the narrative: the obfuscation of the true nature of the relationship between Jack and Tyler. What is revealed in the ontological revelation near the ending of the film is that Jack and Tyler are the same person. Although both Jack and the spectator perceived Tyler to be a completely separate entity

than Jack, the ontological revelation discloses enough information to demonstrate that this is not the case. What is insinuated in the ontological revelation sequence is that all of the moments in which Jack's body had been taken over by Tyler had been excised from the narrative. Had these omitted events remained in the narrative, they would have provided a great deal of information regarding the relationship between Jack and Tyler. The spectator would have been able to understand at an early point that Jack was suffering from a multiple personality disorder. This information would have also provided the spectator with some explanatory information regarding Jack's relationships with other people. Of note is the relationship between Jack and the quirky Marla (Helena Bonham Carter). Jack, although initially interested in Marla, quickly distances himself from her when she and Tyler pair up in a series of sordid sexual encounters. Jack's breakfast-table encounters with Marla on the mornings after these trysts are often cold and unfriendly. Marla often responds to his callous behaviour with confusion and annoyance. The absence of the events where Tyler's personality supplants Jack's personality leads to considerable confusion for both the spectator, Jack and Marla. By removing these intermediate moments, the true relationship between Jack and Tyler is obscured in such a way as to block the causal information that would explain why Jack is behaving the way he is, and why Marla is responding to Jack's behaviour in the way she is. Had these changeovers between Jack and Tyler been made evident to the spectator, the causal information as to why Marla was alternately comforted and repulsed by Jack would be fully elucidated.

Spectatorial Comprehension: Inferences

What is interesting to note about the problematic systematicity of these films is that, although key components of the films' causal chains are removed and only later revealed, the films manage to maintain their comprehensibility throughout. It would seem that the information missing in these narrative lacunae would threaten the systematicity of these films because, "as in many other traditional forms of narration, there is a promise to depict a set of events, acts, and situations which will turn out to have an internal *explanatory coherence*" (Wilson 40). The spectator not only expects an intact narrative systematicity, but requires it in order to make sense of the text. By removing events that are key to the systematicity of the narrative, these films rob the viewer of one of the primary elements used to understand a narrative: causality. Yet, for some reason these films—despite their missing causal sections—can still be understood, even before the missing events are revealed.

The fact that these films do not collapse due to the absence of crucial causal events highlights an important fact about spectator comprehension of narrative texts. The spectator's understanding of a narrative text is remarkably resilient in the face of plot gaps and missing or unclear information. Upon encountering even the most conventional and simplistic narrative, the "members of the audience must respond with an interpretation: they cannot avoid participating in the transaction. They must fill in gaps with essential or likely events, traits and objects which for various reasons have gone unmentioned" (*Story and Discourse* 28). This aspect of viewer comprehension is of utmost importance to narrative texts, especially considering the aforementioned fact that

by their nature, narrative texts are unavoidably incomplete. When a spectator encounters a narrative text, they use different schemata (most notably, the causality schema) to assist them in making logical connections between the different events that comprise the text. This allows the spectator to understand the events without every single step of the causal sequence needing to be overt.

What this tenet of spectator comprehension implies about a narrative film is that understanding a film involves a certain amount of assumptions on the part of the spectator. A spectator's comprehension of a film's narrative is not solely determined by what is shown on screen, but "it is determined also by an enormous and ill-defined collection of inferences, element-to-element connections and identifying classifications that the audience makes and is supposed to make on the basis of the contents of the image track" (Wilson 43). This idea of the viewer being expected to make inferences and rely on their own assumptions in order to understand the narrative of a film has interesting ramifications for the particular films being examined in this study. By having problematic systematicities—removing critical beginning or middle events that are essential in the causal structure of the narrative—these films force the spectator to make inferences of enormous scope and depth. The spectator naturally makes these inferences, as "[their] capacity to supply plausible details is virtually limitless" (*Story and Discourse* 29). While making inferences is common to the comprehension of any narrative, the problematic systematicities of these films push the assumptions that the spectator must make to their extreme limits. In more commonplace narratives, the spectator is expected to make inferences regarding relatively minor causal connections such as the ellipsis between a character leaving their car and entering the kitchen in their apartment. It seems

reasonable to expect that the spectator would supply all of the intermediary causal steps that lead the character from their car, across the parking lot, through the door, up the stairs, etc. However, these films with problematic systematicities are asking the spectator to make inferences regarding information that is both much more complicated and much more crucial to the causal structure of the narrative.

In the case of *The Others*, the spectator is expected to make inferences regarding an alluded-to crucial beginning event in which Grace “went mad” and, at the same time, the servants disappeared and ghostly apparitions began to appear. There are many ways in which such an event could be interpreted by a spectator, each with varying degrees of probability and plausibility. The spectator could infer that Grace flew into a violent rage, offending the servants, causing them to leave quietly in the night. The subsequent isolation of the house in the absence of the servants could then have made the creaks and groans of the old mansion more noticeable. Another possible inference could be that some of the offended servants returned to the house in secret and have been haunting it to seek revenge against Grace. These inferred explanations favour a rational, non-supernatural approach to the mystery of the event. A supernatural explanation of the events may factor in ideas about someone or something (an enraged Grace included) killing the servants, causing their spirits to haunt the house. A spectator could assume that the house is actually haunted and that the strange occurrences were truly the product of ghosts. Thus, the causal events missing from the beginning of the film could include some sort of supernatural intervention into the real world, which spared Grace and the children but took the lives of the servants.

The missing causal events from *The Sixth Sense* also present the spectator with a series of inferential options to explain what happened after Malcolm was shot. These inferences are equally complex in that they must address both the issue of the emotional distance between Malcolm and Anna as well as the issue of Malcolm's intense interest in treating Cole. The spectator could infer that Malcolm recovered from the murder attempt and quickly re-entered the child psychology profession. On top of this, the spectator could infer that the emotional distance between Malcolm and Anna could be due to Malcolm spending more time on his work (in order to compensate for his failure with Vincent) than with his wife. Or, the spectator could infer that the encounter with Vincent was so traumatic as to permanently place a wedge between Malcolm and Anna.

Probability of Inferences

It is important to note that, in the case of both *The Others* and *The Sixth Sense*, the *actual* causal events that occurred in the excised sections are not the most probable events for the spectator to infer. In *The Others*, there exists a slight possibility that the actual scenario—where Grace went mad, killing the children and herself, resulting in their transformation into spirits who sense the real world as though it were a spirit world—could be inferred by the spectator. However, the other inferential options available (wherein disgruntled servants pretend to haunt the house, etc.) are equally, if not more plausible than the events that truly occurred. In *The Sixth Sense*, the actual scenario—where Malcolm dies and then haunts the world until he finds a boy with the same affliction as Vincent and is also the only person who can help Malcolm to overcome his attachment to the earth—is relatively implausible compared with some of the other inferential options available. Another narrative possibility that the spectator could infer

has Malcolm surviving the shooting. In this scenario, Malcolm is so traumatized by the event that his relationship with Anna becomes strained. This trauma could also lead Malcolm to find a patient with the same affliction as Vincent (in this case, Cole) in order to work through the guilt of his inability to assist Vincent. These examples of other potential narrative events that the spectator could infer for both *The Others* and *The Sixth Sense* highlight some of the problems inherent in leaving causal events to the inference of the spectator. Since the inferred information is subject to the spectator's own appeals to the laws of causality, they are no guarantees that they will construct the correct scenario. This is especially true for cases in which the actual scenario is not the most likely or plausible inferential option.

The case of *Fight Club*, however, highlights a much larger problem in the way all of these films leave causal events up to the spectator's inferences. There is a greater significance to the missing causal events of *Fight Club* than merely detailing Tyler's building of the Space Monkey militia. The deeds and future plans of this army are just minor aspects of the events left out of the narrative. What is of utmost causal importance in the missing segments is that in moments of mental inattentiveness (falling asleep, passing out, inattention), Tyler's personality takes over for Jack. This information, had it been given to the spectator when it occurred, would have had a dramatic impact on the causal structure of the film. The spectator would have had enough narrative information to understand that Jack and Tyler were the same person. This excised causal information would have changed the way that the spectator understood the characters. This tenet holds true for *The Others* and *The Sixth Sense*. In both of these other films, the causal information missing from the narrative structure contains crucial details regarding the

nature of the characters themselves. Had the murder of Anne and Nicholas and subsequent suicide of Grace been included in the narrative of *The Others*, the spectator would have been able to understand the “ghostly” apparitions in the house as the presence of live humans. Had the death of Malcolm remained in the narrative of *The Sixth Sense*, the spectator would have understood the emotional distance between Anna and Malcolm. The spectator would have also been able to understand Cole’s initial reluctance to speak with Malcolm and even the reasons for Malcolm and Cole to come together. In all of these cases, the narratives leave out important causal events that would have changed the way the spectator understands the characters.

Manipulation by Forced Inferences

It can be seen, then, that these films capitalize on the spectator’s ability and predilection to infer details regarding missing information. As a narrative, a film can “exploit what is missing and undecidable about a narration in order to raise fundamental issues about character and spectator perception” (Branigan 177). The missing information regarding character-changing causal events manipulates the spectator into substituting her own inferences in the place of solid narrative information. More likely than not, the spectator’s inferences do not include changes in the ontological status of the character. These incorrect inferences are further reinforced because the spectator bases the inferences they make about which causal events could have occurred in the narrative gaps on the information about the character that she does possess. As such, it is extremely unlikely that the spectator is going to supplant the character information they actually possess with conjectures about possible permutations of the nature of the character that

could have occurred within these missing events. Thus, these films remove important, character-changing causal events while not overtly signalling the exact nature of these omissions to the spectator.

This habit of filling in missing narrative information with appropriate assumptions is one of the ways in which the ontological revelation is achieved. The functioning of these ontological revelations hinges on the fact that, in omitting the causal events regarding the true nature of the characters, the spectator will use the principle of causality to come up with their own inferences as to what took place. This aspect of narrative comprehension, coupled with the fact that spectators are predisposed toward making inferences that respect the character information that they already possess, is what allows these films to create a situation in which the spectator is not likely to recognize the possibility of the missing events being character-changing ones. While the spectator may indeed harbour suspicions regarding the importance of the missing narrative events, the exact nature of these events remains unsubstantiated. Thus, when the missing causal events are finally revealed, they come in the form of a substantial disclosure of narrative information.

Narrative Cues: Minor Events

While removing key, character-changing causal events in order to encourage the spectator to make inferences about them should be enough to achieve the ontological revelations, what is interesting about these films is that they use further narrative tools to mislead the spectator and thereby ensure the achievement of the ontological revelation. One of these tools is the removal of any minor causal events that could give the spectator

enough information to correctly understand or infer the existential nature of the characters.

Of the three films being studied, *The Sixth Sense* most often removes minor causal events that would have clued the spectator into the characters' correct state of existence. In re-examining the film with the knowledge of Malcolm's true ontological status, a number of additional causal events which would have cued the reader to the correct reading of Malcolm's existence can be seen as being removed from the narrative until the very ending of the film. One of the best cues that this is happening can be seen in Malcolm's repeated failure at opening his basement door. The first time Malcolm attempts to open the basement door, the spectator is shown the doorknob in a tight close-up that omits all visual detail above and below the knob. Malcolm's hand then enters the frame and he clasps the doorknob, trying to pull the door open. The door fails to open, but this failure is not portrayed as a moment of ontological crisis. Instead, another tight shot features Malcolm's hand reaching into his pocket for a key. This shot is followed immediately by a shot of Malcolm's feet walking down the basement steps. This pattern of shots that are tightly focussed on the doorknob and Malcolm's hand is repeated several times throughout the film, almost every time Malcolm goes to the basement. The spectator, upon encountering these shots, could plausibly infer that the door did not open because it was locked and that Malcolm's retrieval of a key from his pocket led to the door being open. It is not until the ontological revelation sequence that the true nature of Malcolm's trouble with the basement door is revealed. In this sequence, the familiar shot of Malcolm's hand failing to open the basement door is shown in flashback. This is followed by a shot of Malcolm in the present, looking toward the doorknob. At first, the

doorknob is as tightly framed as it had been previously. However, the shot soon deviates from the familiar template as the camera dollies backward from the tight shot on the doorknob. In dollying backward, the shot reveals a heavy table loaded with books, an obstruction that could not have been previously seen by the spectator due to the tight framing on the doorknob. The extra visual information yielded by this shot implies that Malcolm's former attempts to open the basement door were not the result of the door being locked (as is suggested by his reaching into his pocket for a key), but the result of the door being blocked by the book table. This new information further implies that each time Malcolm entered the basement after being blocked by the door, a few intermediate events were omitted. These events could have been either Malcolm moving the table and opening the door or Malcolm's ghostly form passing through the doorway. Since the presence of the table comes as a shock to Malcolm at the end of the film, the latter scenario is the most likely explanation. By removing these minor causal events, the narrative subtly coerces the spectator into making minor causal inferences in order to connect the given events. The spectator readily responds to this coercion by positing a plausible set of intermediary actions (the most likely being: Malcolm reaches into his pocket for a key, he uses the key to open the door, he walks through the door and onto the steps). By making these minor causal connections, the spectator is enabling the narrative to omit information that could have resulted in the spectator correctly determining Malcolm's ontological status. Although instances of removing minor causal events surface repeatedly in *The Sixth Sense*, this strategy does not seem to play a factor in either *The Others* or *Fight Club*. Once the ontological status of the characters is correctly understood near the end of *The Others*, a (re)viewing of the film suggests that no minor

causal events had been removed. It is a bit more difficult to classify *Fight Club* according to this criterion of minor missing causal information. Since all of the causal events that are missing are key character-changing causal events (read: Tyler taking over Jack's body), it would seem inappropriate to consider them minor. A re-viewing of the film with the correct ontological status of Jack/Tyler in mind reveals no other information being removed from the narrative other than Tyler's control of Jack's body.

Narrative Cues: Equivocation

The strategy of removing minor causal events is just one tool for misleading the spectator in their understanding of the narrative events and subsequently, the characters' ontological statuses. Another way in which these films bias the spectator toward an incorrect reading of the characters' ontological statuses is by presenting those events which could potentially reveal the characters' true ontological state in an ambivalent manner. This is narrative equivocation: "presenting information that can signify two opposite interpretations [in such a way as to] protect its hermeneutic enigma while not actually lying to the spectator" (Turim 166). *The Sixth Sense* has a deep investment in this kind of strategy. A (re)viewing of the film with the knowledge of Malcolm's true ontological status reveals a series of events and scenes that could have potentially revealed Malcolm's true ontological status, but do not. For example, any event where Malcolm is in the same space as another character (with the exception of Cole) has the potential of revealing Malcolm's ontological status by virtue of the fact that Malcolm goes unnoticed by that person. In most cases—such as when Malcolm walks down the street—his corporeal inexistence is not a major issue because there isn't an expectation

for Malcolm to be interacting with anyone. However, there are several cases in which Malcolm is in situations where it could be reasonably expected that he would interact with the others in his immediate space. A key scene which demonstrates the ambivalent presentation of narrative information regarding Malcolm's true ontological status is the one in which Malcolm rushes in late to the restaurant where Anna is celebrating their anniversary. The first device used to hide the fact that the two are not interacting is their lack of mutual conversation. When Malcolm first sits down, he begins a long diatribe about Cole and his affliction. Anna sits quietly, not looking at Malcolm as he delivers a one-sided monologue. The absence of this dialogue has the potential of being attributed to both Malcolm's self-centredness and Anna's anger at Malcolm's late arrival. The lack of interaction between the two continues when the bill arrives and Anna grabs it before Malcolm can. At this point, Malcolm ends his monologue and finally addresses Anna, asking her to understand his intense interest in Cole's case. This moment carries the potential of revealing their lack of interaction since it would be impossible for Anna to respond to the non-corporeal Malcolm's supplication. Her lack of response is due to the fact that she is unaware of his ghostly presence. However, it can also very plausibly be understood as an emotional reaction: Anna is too upset with Malcolm's late arrival to speak to him. Since there has been very little narrative information that would cast suspicion or doubt onto Malcolm's ontological status (other than the character-changing causal information which had been excised from the narrative), the second reading is very likely to be the one, which the spectator makes. A further cue that is used to portray Malcolm's physical absence from the scene ambivalently is the way that Anna quietly says "Happy Anniversary" in a tone that suggests that she is upset. While she is actually

mumbling this to herself, saddened by the absence of her dead husband, it could equally be interpreted as an instance of interaction where she is saying it angrily to the inconsiderately-late Malcolm. Further still, the spectator is distracted from the lack of interaction when Anna glances up in Malcolm's direction during her preparations to leave. Were Malcolm actually physically present in the restaurant, Anna would indeed be looking at him and thus, visually interacting with him. Due to his ontological status as a ghost, however, this is an impossibility. A closer review of this scene reveals that a sound cue—an off-screen woman laughing loudly and boisterously—is what catches Anna's attention. At the moment of this sound cue, Anna glances at the woman making the sound who just happens to be in the same direction as the ghost of Malcolm. This matter of coincidental illusory eye contact between Malcolm and other characters is a device that is used throughout the film. Another example of it occurs earlier in the film when Malcolm waits for Cole to come home from school. Before Cole enters the door, Malcolm is seen sitting in a chair across from Cole's mother, Lynn (Toni Collette). The two stare straight ahead, in the direction of the other, until Cole opens the door and they both glance over at him. Although the two do not speak to each other, their (illusory) eye contact suggests that there has been some interaction between them: Lynn and Malcolm seem to be staring directly into each others' eyes. With Malcolm's true ontological status in mind, this apparent visual interaction between the two of them can be interpreted for what it really is: just a coincidental eyeline match as Lynn stares off into space.

Fight Club, although it also features many scenes that could potentially reveal Jack's true ontological existence (as both Jack and Tyler), does not go to the same great lengths as *The Sixth Sense* does to present these scenes in an equivocal way to the viewer.

The scenes that carry the potential for the ontological reveal are any scenes in which Jack interacts with characters that know him as Tyler. Since these characters know Jack as Tyler, they base their understanding of his actions and behaviour on what they know of Tyler: his personality and his past deeds. Thus, when Jack interacts with these characters as Jack—a person unaware of his actions and behaviours and identity as Tyler—he behaves in ways that confuse those who know him as Tyler. Furthermore, since the spectator knows Jack as Jack and has not had access to any of Jack's actions or behaviours as Tyler, the confusion registered by the other characters is unexplainable in terms of the narrative. These moments are likely to appear as narrative incongruities for the spectator. Key situations featuring these incongruities occur between Jack and Marla, the woman who knows Jack as Tyler. The first of these scenes occurs when Jack encounters Marla in the house the morning after she is brought there by Tyler. Marla, thinking she is encountering her lover Tyler, greets Jack warmly. Jack, unaware that he is the one that brought her there, is shocked at seeing Marla at his house and immediately asks her why she is in his house. Marla responds with confusion and slight annoyance. Jack, still flabbergasted, questions her again. Marla responds with a prompt "Fuck you!" before storming out of the house. Had the spectator been cued to Jack's actual ontological status as both Jack and Tyler, they would have known that Jack himself (as Tyler) brought Marla to the house the night before for an athletic night of sex. Therefore, when Marla was greeted by the man she had slept with the night before with the question "What are you doing in my house?" she was interpreting it as a sudden mood swing on the man's part as well as a rude demand for her to get out. As it stands, both Jack and the spectator are unaware of his actual ontological status and so Marla's explosive reaction to

his relatively innocent questions registers as being emotionally incongruous to the situation. The pitch of these types of interaction between Jack and Marla—where Marla’s actions appear to be incongruous or confusing—escalate throughout the film. Marla begins making completely perplexing statements to Jack such as “You’re such a nutcase. I can’t keep up.” Much in the same way as Jack’s interactions with Marla result in odd character responses, so too do his interactions with the Space Monkey recruits. When Jack first encounters one of their missions of mischief—the vandalizing and arson of an apartment building—he reacts with incredulity, asking them “What the fuck did you guys do?” The recruits, who know Jack as Tyler, the man who accompanied them on this mission, are immediately shaken and confused as to why he would ask them a question like this. From the point of view of Jack (and the spectator), unaware of his status as Tyler, their confusion registers as another incongruity. While incongruities such as these carry the potential of revealing that there is something questionable about Jack’s identity, the film has a variety of narrative strategies it uses to minimize their intrusiveness and effectiveness and ease the spectator’s mind. One of the primary ways the film does this is by offering a series of pseudo-explanations that appear to offer answers to the incongruities. In the case of Marla, the film has provided a default pseudo-explanation about her confusing behaviour by framing her as a volatile character. Thus, any odd behaviour on her part could be explained away as quirky behavioural traits on her part. This tactic can also be seen at play in Jack’s interactions with the Space Monkeys. The Space Monkeys, when confronted by Jack with confusing questions or comments about their actions in Project Mayhem, resort to chanting a mantra, “The first rule of Project Mayhem is that you do not ask questions.” Their odd behaviour, then, is framed by the

pseudo-explanation that they are merely acting out of subservience to the bizarre missives given them as a part of Project Mayhem. It is important to note that the explanations that the film is offering are actually pseudo-explanations: accounts that only *appear* to elucidate the problems of the incongruities. While seeming to solve the incongruities, what these pseudo-explanations actually do is just give the viewer enough explanatory information to distract them from the incongruity. The incongruities still exist, but they are masked until another important plot point can come in to divert the spectator's attention. So although *Fight Club* presents scenes that could potentially reveal the characters' true ontological statuses with much less equivocation than *The Sixth Sense*, it still uses strategies to mislead the viewer from the correct reading of the narrative events.

The Others is an interesting film to compare to both *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* regarding the additional strategies it uses to mislead the spectator from the correct readings of the characters' true ontological status. Unlike *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club*, there are no events in the narrative that could potentially reveal the characters' ontological status until the ontological revelation. As such, there is no reason for any telltale events to be presented in an ambivalent fashion. However, there are several moments in the film wherein the characters' true state of existence could be called into question. Scenes such as Charles' somnambulistic reappearance or Bertha's mysterious statements regarding the Intruders may lead the spectator to be suspicious regarding the nature of the characters' existence. However, the film is very careful to present this extra narrative information in a very enigmatic way. Although Charles' reappearance and Bertha's statements may make the spectator mindful of the exact nature of the characters, this information does not give the spectator any definitive information about their nature.

Despite raising the spectators' suspicions, *The Others* also employs tactics designed to distract the viewer from questioning the ontological status of the characters. Although the events of the day that Grace went mad are of interest to the spectator, the primary focus of the story revolves around the issue of whether or not there are actually ghosts haunting the house. The narrative, while offering several cues which suggest a supernatural explanation for the ghostly disturbances—the gravestones on the property, the new servants' secret conviction in the existence of ghosts, the children's sightings and drawings of ghostly figures—also depicts the disturbances in such a way as to allow for natural explanations. Since the disturbances are always off-screen (ghostly noises or the unlocking of doors), it is always probable that someone (such as a disgruntled ex-servant) is causing them. By presenting different reasons which both favour and oppose a supernatural explanation to the ghostly disturbances, the narrative of *The Others* creates hesitation between a natural or a supernatural explanation. In being swayed back and forth between these two options, the spectator is focusing on the mystery of the ghostly disturbances rather than on the issue that could call the ontological status of the characters into question: what happened the day that Grace went mad. By employing this as the central focal point of the plot, *The Others* also works to cue the spectator away from the correct reading of the ontological status of the characters and toward incorrect readings.

Spectatorial Comprehension: Contingency

What is truly fascinating about *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* is that, despite employing such a wide variety of strategies to cue the spectator toward

incorrect readings of the characters' ontological status, when the ontological revelation actually occurs, the spectator is willing to accept this new information. Even though new ontological information dramatically changes the nature of the characters as the spectator has been encouraged to understand them, the spectator manages to comprehend the new information and accept it. This signals an important aspect about a viewer's comprehension of a narrative text: contingency.

When comprehending a film, "an individual's attention ...works forward and backward in an uneven manner in constructing large-scale, hierarchical patterns which represent a particular story as an abstract grouping of knowledge based on an underlying schema" (Branigan 16). As discussed before, one of the primary schemata used in comprehending a narrative text is the causal schema. This causal schema can definitely be seen as an important part of each of the films in this study. *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* all depend upon this schema not only to organize narrative information, but also to encourage the spectator toward incorrect inferences regarding missing narrative information. This raises the question of how the spectator can assimilate new, contradictory information (regarding the ontological statuses of various characters) into their comprehension of a narrative text when the texts have worked to exclude this information and bias the spectator against it. Further still, there is the question of how new, contradictory information can *replace* the information that the spectator already possesses. This is an especially salient question since the new information demonstrates that the spectator has incorrectly comprehended the film up until that point. The answers to these queries can be elucidated by understanding that a spectator's comprehension of a narrative is an on-going process. As a process rather than

an end goal, the understanding of a narrative involves a certain degree of contingency. In comprehending a narrative, the spectator must be constantly reassessing and re-evaluating all past and present textual information and be open to the idea that “unexpected information can cause a reorientation of the schema in order to reclaim the important from the superficial” (Branigan 16). So although there is the expectation that a text will have a coherent causal systematicity, the contingency with which a spectator assigns narrative value to events allows for key scenes to be withheld for the purpose of mystery or suspense without threatening to collapse that text’s coherence. In cases such as these, “it will be shown to be exactly the point that these are *temporary* withholdings only, provisional obstructions that will receive their own dramatic rationale somewhere later in the narrative” (italics added, Wilson 40). The key point here is that problematic systematicities in narratives are not problematic, provided the key causal information that is missing is tendered at some point in the film. The fact that key causal scenes were left out of *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* no longer becomes an issue so long as the information contained in these key causal scenes are eventually disclosed, which is exactly what happens in all three films. The end of *The Others* reveals that Grace smothered both Nicholas and Anne before committing suicide. The end of *The Sixth Sense* reveals Malcolm’s death from Vincent’s bullet. The end of *Fight Club* reveals Jack’s changeovers into Tyler. The problematic systematicities are just a tool that the narratives use to lay the basis for the ontological revelations.

Conclusion

What has been revealed through this examination of event presentation is that these films use sophisticated narrative strategies that capitalize on the ways in which spectators comprehend narrative texts in order to achieve ontological revelations. By presenting the narrative events in such a way as to omit key causal information, these films are purposefully obscuring the correct reading of the events and the characters. In addition to this, these films use specific cues to influence the spectator to mobilize sets of entirely plausible yet ultimately incorrect assumptions about the narrative lacunae. It is the combination of narrative obfuscation and spectator manipulation that allows for the ontological revelation to take place.

Chapter 2: Character Presentation

As has been outlined in the previous chapter, *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* all use specific strategies of event presentation in order to achieve the ontological revelation. These strategies range from omitting important causal events from the narrative to offering cues which bias the spectator toward incorrect inferences and assumptions regarding these missing events. By utilizing these strategies, these films carefully influence the spectator to base their comprehension of each given film on narrative inferences and assumptions as much as on concrete narrative information. When the moment of the ontological revelation occurs, the missing narrative information is revealed, proving the inferences and assumptions to be incorrect. The fact that the causal information that is missing from each of these narratives contains crucial details regarding the ontological status of the films' characters illuminates a second set of narrative strategies being utilized by these films. This additional group of narrative strategies concerns not only the way that the narrative events are presented, but also how this event presentation is tied to the characters of the narrative texts. This is because, when watching a film, "the status we accord [an event] - its spatial, temporal and causal implications—derives from explicit relationships with the character" (Branigan 50). The spectator's comprehension of events is tied to their comprehension of the characters that participate in those events. Due to this fact, it can be seen that character presentation is a critical component in the spectator's comprehension of a narrative text. It can be argued that, for a spectator, "characters are central to the rhetorical and aesthetic effects of narrative texts" (Smith 4). As such, it is important to take a closer look at the ways in which the characters that populate these films—performing and experiencing the events

of the films as well as being the locus of the ontological revelations—are narratively presented. Closely examining the specific ways in which the spectator attends to and has access to the characters of these films will further explicate this additional set of narrative strategies utilized in the construction of the ontological revelation. As well, examining character presentation will serve to broaden the understanding of the spectatorial comprehension of these films. Delineating the many different and complex ways in which a spectator engages with the characters will also reveal whether character presentation utilizes similar types of comprehension-manipulation strategies that are being utilised at the level of event presentation.

Recognition

Much in the same way that the presentation of events in these films seems, on the surface, to be similar to the presentation of events in other films, the ways in which the spectator attends to the characters of *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* also seem to be similar to the ways they attend to characters in any other film. In a straightforward manner, the spectator readily identifies the characters of these films and can easily follow them through the events of the film (no matter how these events are presented). In *The Others*, the spectator very quickly establishes an identity for the character of Grace. Once they have done this, they can follow Grace's actions and understand her relationship with other characters such as the servants and the children. The spectator can also easily establish identities for the servants and the children as they, in turn, enter the narrative. In *The Sixth Sense*, the spectator can readily determine identities for the main characters, Malcolm and Cole and subsequently follow their

actions through the events of the film. The identities for supporting characters Anna and Lynn as well as other minor characters can just as easily be found. From the beginning of *Fight Club*, the spectator establishes Jack's identity and follows his actions very closely. Other characters such as Marla and Tyler as well as the rest of the supporting cast can also have their identities promptly established by the spectator. With all three of these films, it seems as though the first way that the spectator engages with and establishes a relationship with the characters is through establishing identities for the characters. This is a normal way for a spectator to engage with a character on screen, because "humans are predisposed, biologically and culturally, to attend to humanlike agents in representations" (Bordwell 153). This primary way that spectators engage with characters is of utmost importance to the spectator's comprehension of the film. By paying attention to the "humanlike agents" of characters, the spectator is locating a subject to follow through the transformations that make up a narrative.

At this primary level of character engagement—wherein the spectator establishes identities for the on-screen characters—these films with ontological revelations seem to be no different than any other films. However, the fact that the spectator does not have definitive information regarding the nature of the characters' existence until the ontological revelation suggests that there is something askew in the spectator's identification of those characters. It isn't until the moment of the ontological revelation that the spectator has enough concrete information to identify the characters and their ontological statuses. At the very least, it can be stated that, until this point, the spectator does not *correctly* identify the characters. Thus, the identities that the spectator establishes for Grace, the children and the servants in *The Others* are not the true

identities for these characters. This notable exception, of course, is the unlikely situation wherein the spectator initially identifies these characters as ghostly presences. The same situation can be applied to *Fight Club*, when the spectator establishes identities for Jack and Tyler in the opening scene. Only if the spectator establishes their identity as being two halves of a split personality, is the spectator's identification of the characters incorrect. The case is a bit different for *The Sixth Sense*, where a spectator establishing Malcolm's identity as a live person at the beginning of the film would be correct in doing so. However, if the spectator does not re-establish a new identity for Malcolm following the ellipsis of his murder, then the spectator's identification of the character can be seen as incorrect.

This issue of the spectator establishing incorrect identities for the characters raises an important question about character engagement. If the spectator's initial engagement with the characters is not identification (or at least not correct identification), then what kind of engagement is occurring when a spectator attends to these characters and follows their actions through the events of the film? As was mentioned in a previous paragraph, spectators are predisposed to attend to human-like entities on screen. This process involves distinguishing particular textual markings and cues in the narrative and seeing them as the components that make up individuals or distinct entities. Once establishing these textual cues as individual entities, the spectator is then able to follow these entities through the transformations of the narrative. It is this process of understanding the textual cues of light and dark patterns on the screen as individuated characters that is the first way in which the spectator engages with the characters. This process should not be confused with identification, however, since the spectator's comprehension of textual

cues as characters does not entail the spectator correctly identifying the true nature of a character. Rather, this process is one of *recognition*. According to Murray Smith, recognition is the process wherein a spectator understands a set of textual cues as composing a continuous and individuated character—one that is distinct from other characters as well as able to be re-discriminated in different situations at different times (Smith 110). An important aspect of recognition that needs to be acknowledged is that it is more of an automatic response to characters on screen than is identification—a process that implies the spectator having a cognitive understanding of a given character. Indeed, the prototypical recognition scenario in which textual cues on screen are understood as characters by the spectator is “so automatic in most films that it is completely taken for granted” (Smith 118). Although recognition may be taken for granted, it has several important ramifications for narrative texts that should not go unanalysed.

Recognition: Bodily Continuity

Upon close examination, it can be seen that *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* have an exceptionally vested interest in establishing recognition as a primary level of spectator-character engagement. All of these films feature characters that adhere very strictly to recognition’s tenets of individuation and continuity. This can be seen in their uniform employment of one of the most fundamental tools that a narrative text can use to enforce character continuity for the purposes of spectator engagement: bodily continuity. Maintaining a strict bodily continuity for the characters is important for character recognition because “the perceptible, exterior traits of performers...play a central role in the individuation and re-identification of characters” (Smith 113). All three of these films

abide by the principle of bodily continuity in having each character portrayed by a single actor. The end result of this practice is that the traits and attributes assigned to the different characters are made manifest in separate and individual actors. This is extremely important for bodily continuity because it means that a character's traits and attributes remain fixed in each of the respective actors. At no point is the spectator required to understand anything other than the textual markings of that particular actor as a particular individuated character. This can be seen foremost in *Fight Club*, where the character of Jack is embodied by actor Edward Norton. Norton is the first humanlike entity seen on screen and his character of Jack and, as such, is easily recognized and subsequently followed throughout the rest of the narrative. The same holds true for the character of Tyler Durden. Continuously played by Brad Pitt, the character of Tyler is recognizable as a distinct character throughout the entire film. *The Sixth Sense* also maintains a strong bodily continuity for the main character of Malcolm by having the character uniformly embodied by actor Bruce Willis. The uniformity of the representation of the character of Malcolm is quite remarkable. It could be assumed that Malcolm's body would have different formal properties in its live, corporeal state than it would in its ghostly spectre state. This leaves open the possibility for the film to disrupt the rules of bodily continuity. However, the film reneges on this possibility by maintaining the same continuity for Malcolm regardless of his ontological status. In fact, Malcolm's bodily continuity is further reinforced by the fact that he wears the same clothes throughout the entire film. The diegetic reason for this contrivance is that Malcolm, as an incorporeal entity, only has access to the clothes he was wearing when he passed away. Irrespective of the reasons for it, this device adds to the continuity (and therefore, the recognizability) of the

character despite changing contexts. The characters in *The Others* also all maintain the same bodily features throughout the film. This bodily continuity is only violated once in the film, in a particularly important exception. Midway through the film, Grace leaves Anne in a room by herself so that Anne can play quietly in her communion dress and veil. Upon returning to the room, Grace begins arguing with Anne about changing out of these special clothes. This argument stops abruptly when Grace sees an elderly woman's hand poking out from under Anne's veil, where Anne's hand should be. When Grace moves in closer to inspect this situation, she finds that Anne's clothes are worn not by Anne, but by an elderly woman. The elderly woman looks up at the awe-struck Grace and asks her "What's the matter?" in Anne's voice. This is an unsettling moment for both the spectator and Grace, both of whom were unlikely to expect to see an elderly woman in Anne's place, embodying her clothes and her voice. Grace quickly acts on her disbelief by demanding of the elderly woman "What have you done with my daughter?" The elderly woman giggles and responds, again in Anne's voice, "Are you mad? I am your daughter." In a fit of rage, Grace grabs on to the elderly woman and starts shaking her violently while shouting "You are not my daughter" repeatedly. Finally, Grace rips the communion veil off the figure to reveal the person underneath. In another shocking twist, Grace's unveiling does not reveal the old woman, but instead exposes a frightened Anne. Anne rushes away from Grace, shouting, "She wants to kill me." This statement is a communication to both Grace and the spectator that the figure under the veil had been Anne all along. The fact that all of the attributes of Anne—her clothes, her veil and her voice—remained the same while the only thing that had changed was the body associated with the character of Anne demonstrates the strength of bodily continuity in the film.

When the one-character/one-body rule of bodily continuity is broken in the film, it becomes a crisis point for the recognition of characters for both Grace and the spectator. Thus, this exception emphasises how, like *Fight Club* and *The Sixth Sense*, *The Others* devotes a great deal of narrative energy to present bodily continuity as a way for the spectator to engage with the characters on the level of recognition.

Recognition: Proper Names

In the case of *The Sixth Sense*, the dedication to establishing character recognition extends to the film's use of another narrative tool: the use of a proper name. In addition to associating a grouping of character traits with a continuous body, another effective strategy for ensuring the spectator's recognition of a character is to associate these traits with a proper name. *The Sixth Sense* is very clear in establishing and maintaining the name "Malcolm Crowe" for its main character. The first scene of the film features Malcolm and Anna cuddling on the couch as they look at a plaque emblazoned with the name "Dr. Malcolm Crowe," honouring him for his work with children. Anna reads the words on the plaque out loud and, after reading his name, she turns to him and says, "That's you." Throughout the course of events, the film maintains this steady use of Malcolm's proper name in association with the set of continuous traits (bodily and otherwise) that make up Malcolm's character. In doing so, the film employs an extra set of cues through which the character of Malcolm can be recognized. In a curious counterpoint, these sets of proper name cues are either delayed or missing from both *The Others* and *Fight Club*. Although the character of Grace maintains bodily continuity throughout *The Others*, the issue of her proper name is a bit more convoluted. It isn't

until over 70 minutes into the film—when her husband returns—that her proper name is used for the first time. Although it can be assumed that her name is Grace throughout the entire film, she is referred to by an assortment of other names such as “the lady of the house,” “mother,” “mum,” “mummy,” or “ma’am” instead. The variety of titles given to her doesn’t allow for the same type of recognition as does the use of one proper name. *Fight Club* takes this missing proper name a step further. Instead of delaying the use of the proper name of the main character until late in the film, the proper name of the protagonist—Edward Norton’s character—is never revealed. Instead, this main character is associated with a series of different names that are textually marked as false. The first two names this character adopts are “Cornelius” and “Rupert,” which he uses to avoid revealing his identity when sneaking into group therapy sessions. The next name that he adopts—and most frequently applies to himself in his voiceover narration—is “Jack,” a name he finds in a discarded and absurd magazine article. This lack of a consistent, proper name even extends to the credit sequence, where Edward Norton is credited as playing “Narrator” instead of Jack. Together, all of these strategies for omitting Norton’s character’s proper name result in a character whose recognition is based mainly on the bodily continuity of Edward Norton. By delaying or completely removing the use of a proper name in relation to the characters, both *The Others* and *Fight Club* opt out of using the proper name as a tool for recognizing the spectator. Despite this fact, however, the characters of these films remain recognizable. This is most likely because “at the top of the [hierarchy of cues] are human agents performing actions” (Bordwell 153). Due to this fact, it can be seen that bodily continuity is the bedrock upon which recognition is established and maintained. It could even be asserted that the lack of proper names

throughout *The Others* and *Fight Club* may force the spectator to cling more significantly to bodily continuity as the source of recognition.

The amount of narrative energy exerted in these films in order to ensure that the spectator engages with the characters on the level of recognition is significant. It demands a closer look at whether or not a relationship exists between character recognition and ontological revelations. To begin with, it should be noted that the films of this study place a narrative emphasis on spectators being able to *recognize* these characters rather than (correctly) *identify* them. This may be a subtle distinction, but it has a tremendous importance for these films. Identification of a character implies that some sort of cognitive understanding of that character is achieved. As has already been discussed, due to the surprise factor inherent in a film with an ontological revelation, this type of identification is not at work. Through the use of bodily continuity and proper names, however, these films can encourage the spectator to engage with a character without necessarily identifying them correctly. In terms of narrative comprehension, this recognition is a much more complex matter than would initially appear.

Recognition: Activating the Human Schema

By having textual cues that coalesce into individuated and continuous characters that the spectator can recognize, these films encourage the spectator to utilize an already-possessed knowledge structure (or schema): the human schema. Based on knowledge built up from an individual's personal experience, a schema is a model "that is used to predict and classify new sensory data" (Branigan 13). The human schema, for example, is a knowledge structure that helps an individual to structure and organize any information

they receive about humans. Recognizing a human entity on screen as a character, then, involves the spectator organizing the textual cues (of light and dark patterns on a screen) into a character. This organization is based on what that spectator knows about a character and how this information manifests itself in that spectator's human schema. It needs to be noted that this process of applying a schema to textual cues has a dramatic effect on those textual cues because "classifications which a person imposes on material at the time of its processing will limit the ways in which the material can be subsequently accessed and used in problem solving" (Branigan 13). In the specific case of film characters, their recognition by a spectator indicates that that spectator is organizing a film's textual cues into the figure of a character via the human schema. In doing so, there is potential for those textual cues to be distorted by that individual's human schema. This is especially true because of the fact that "character construction is...a dynamic process in which the person schema and cultural models allow us to leap ahead of what we are given and form expectations" (Smith 31). In other words, when a spectator's human schema organizes the film's textual cues into a character, that schema also influences the spectator's expectations and assumptions regarding those cues. Thus, when the spectator recognizes Grace, Malcolm or Jack, not only are they reading the textual cues as the characters "Grace," "Malcolm," and "Jack", but they are also assigning to those characters a certain set of assumptions that are implicit in that spectator's human schema. Although every person has a different human schema based on his or her own individual experiences, "the common-sense prototype of the person is the putatively sane, mentally active and uncoerced human adult" (Bordwell 152). The ramifications that this

prototypical model of a human agent has for the process of recognition in films with ontological revelations are considerable.

One of the first ramifications of applying the human schema to these films is that the spectator is likely to engage one of the most basic assumptions of the prototypical human schema: that a recognizable character is a sane character. This assumption is questionable at best when applied to some of the films in this study. The idea that recognizable characters are sane is obviously not the case in *Fight Club*, where Jack has undergone a mental breakdown that has resulted in him possessing two distinct personalities. It is also arguably false for *The Others*, in which Grace suddenly murders her children and commits suicide. Her sanity is questioned throughout the film, but it isn't until the final moments of the film that her unsound thinking and activities on the day of the murder-suicide are revealed. The fact that the evidentiary information that demarcates these characters as mentally unsound is not revealed until near the ending of each film speaks to the contingent nature of the attributes assigned to characters. The human prototype attribute of sanity is applied to the recognized characters, but only until it is replaced by new character information. However, the power of these prototypical assumptions in defining the spectator's engagement with the characters and their actions should not be dismissed due to their contingency. In fact, it is these assumptions regarding character that fill the gap of missing appropriate character information (as well as the missing causal information discussed in the previous chapter) until it is properly revealed. So despite being replaceable by later character information, these assumptions are very much a part of the spectator's engagement with character until that character information is divulged. As such, the spectator guides their own reading of the character

and their actions by the prototypical assumptions that are a part of the human schema. In the case of *Fight Club* and *The Others*, the spectator reads these characters' actions as though they were the actions of sane beings.

Another, much more fundamental problematic that arises out of the application of the prototypical human model is its implied assumption that the recognizable characters are, in fact, human. Although this may be the case in *Fight Club*, where Jack is a human entity, the same does not hold true for either *The Others* or *The Sixth Sense*. In the latter two films, the characters who are the subject of the ontological revelation have the semblance of human beings, but do not display one of the essential characteristics of humans: a solid physical body. As such, the assumption that these beings are humans just because they are recognizable as characters is also false.

It can be seen that the activation of the assumptions implicit in the human schema's prototypical model of a human by these films contributes to the achievement of the ontological revelation. Both assumptions engaged—that the recognizable characters are sane and, in fact, human—are key to the truth of the characters' ontological status. In the case of the sanity of the characters, the spectator—in engaging the prototypical human model—assumes that the characters are sane until further information is given. This is why the possibility that Jack is suffering from a split personality or the possibility that Grace has both homicidal and suicidal tendencies remain possibilities: they are assumed to not be the case until conclusive evidence is given. The evidence of their mental instability is hidden until the moment of the revelation because this information bears the truth of the characters' ontological status: Grace's mental breakdown leads to the death of herself and her children. Jack's split personality is his true ontological status.

The same holds true for the assumption that the characters are human. For *The Others* and *The Sixth Sense*, the fact that the characters are not human is completely overridden by the prototypical human model assumption that the characters are human. Thus, activating the assumptions entailed by the human schema helps these films achieve the ontological revelation. By ensuring that the characters are recognizable, then, these narratives provoke the spectator into enacting the human schema and, therefore, possess the prototypical attributes of humanity and sanity. This is why it is important to demarcate the difference between the spectator engaging with the characters through recognition and identification. Were *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* interested in ensuring that the spectator correctly identified the characters, the ontological revelation could not occur.

Recognition: Visual Bias

An undeniable aspect about character recognition in these films is the extent to which it is rooted in the visual facet of these texts. This should not come as a surprise considering the fact that the narrative cues in any film are predominantly visual. After all, “films, obviously, are more visually specific than novels, and filmmakers traditionally prefer visual representations to verbal ones” (*Coming to Terms* 38). It does, however, seem somewhat surprising that all three of these films—whose characters have unconventional existences and questionable ontological statuses—would have such a heavy investment in offering strong visual evidence of the characters for the purposes of recognition. Further still, it is surprising that two of these films—*The Others* and *Fight Club*—go so far as to resist recognition on the basis of the proper name in order to

further encourage recognition on the visual basis of bodily continuity. This unexpected reliance on concrete visual evidence of existence prompts a closer investigation into the ramifications of visual character recognition. In all three of these films, the characters that undergo the ontological revelation are visually represented with steadfast concreteness and constancy. In *The Others*, all of the characters—despite being non-corporeal spirits—are depicted as solid, visual entities with unwavering bodily continuity. The one deviation from this rule is Anne's appearance as the elderly woman. This situation is attenuated, however, by being narratively marked as a point of crisis and therefore an exception that maintains the rule. Malcolm's character in *The Sixth Sense* also displays an unwavering visual solidity. However, the example of Malcolm is even more outstanding as an exemplar of visual evidence being used to support recognition. This is because, unlike *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* gives visual representations of a character in two different states. In *The Sixth Sense*, there are visual representations of Malcolm from both before and after his murder transforms him into a non-corporeal entity. What is interesting about this case is that the visual representations remain constant despite his transformation. In *Fight Club*, there is ample visual evidence that attests to the solid physicality of an imaginary character Tyler Durden. The bulk of the film is comprised of scenes featuring both Jack and Tyler. These two characters interact not only with each other but also with different physical objects. These types of visual representations all frame Tyler as a solid entity.

The result of all of this optical evidence to support character recognition is that these films visually prompt the spectator to engage the person schema. As a result, the spectator is also influenced toward engaging all of the prototypical human model

assumptions that go along with recognition. In *The Others*, the spectator has visual evidence that allows him or her to recognize Grace, the children and the servants but no such visual information for the ghostlike Intruders. This situation influences the spectator toward engaging the human schema for Grace and the others while not engaging it for the Intruders. This helps to bias the spectator toward evaluating Grace, the children and the servants as human entities and the Intruders as not human. This is why the disclosure of the information that Grace and the others are the ghosts while the Intruders are, in fact, the live, corporeal entities comes as a shock to the spectator. In all probability, the spectator had been influenced by the visual representations made by the film to assume the opposite. It should also be noted that following the ontological revelation, the Intruders are given an ample amount of screen time. This extra screen time gives the spectator the opportunity to recognize each of them. By allowing the spectator to visually recognize this set of Intruder characters, the narrative of *The Others* encourages the spectator to apply the human schema to them and thus understand them as sane, tangible people.

The visual biasing of the spectator toward applying the human schema to a recognized, yet ontologically-unstable character can also be seen in *The Sixth Sense*. The clearest example of this type of biasing can be found in the scene in which Malcolm and Cole's mother, Lynn, sit across from each other on sofa chairs, apparently making eye contact. As discussed in the previous chapter, the events are presented in an equivocal manner so that the ontological truth of the situation—Lynn staring off into space—is not made clear to the spectator. One of the reasons why the truth about Malcolm's ontological status is not obvious to the spectator is that Malcolm is visually present. The

spectator can recognize that there is a human figure sitting in the chair across from Lynn and, due to his bodily continuity throughout the film, the spectator can recognize the human figure as the character Malcolm. As a result of this visual recognition, the spectator enacts the human schema and engages with the character of Malcolm as if he were actually present. In the same way, *Fight Club* offers ample visual evidence to encourage the spectator to recognize Tyler Durden. The film has many scenes in which Jack and Tyler interact with each other and even several scenes in which Tyler interacts with others such as the cosmetic counter staff. Although Tyler does not exist outside of Jack's body, *Fight Club* gives the spectator enough visual substantiation to allow the spectator to recognize Tyler and therefore apply the human schema to him as a unique entity. It can be seen that in all three of these films, the spectator is visually biased toward applying the human schema to the characters that undergo the ontological revelation. In this way, these films encourage the spectator to judge these ontologically-questionable characters by the model of the prototypical human. The understanding of these particular characters as prototypically sane, live humans is a necessary requirement for the sudden revelation—that they actually possess a completely different ontological status—to take place.

Alignment

The fact that *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* use visual cues to encourage the application of the human schema to characters with unconventional ontological statuses reveals that some weighted narrative decisions are at work in terms of character presentation. Since these characters have ontological statuses that lie outside

the norms of the human schema (sane, human), it is entirely plausible to suggest that their visual representation should not be one that automatically mobilizes the spectator to apply the human schema. However, with these films the narrative decision has been made to present these unconventional character modes in the same way that any normal, corporeal and/or sane characters would be presented. In *The Others*, the spectator is shown the incorporeal Grace, children and servants while the corporeal Intruders are not shown until the end of the film. Throughout *The Sixth Sense*, the ghost of Malcolm is presented in the same way as the live characters. *Fight Club* shows Jack and Tyler as separate entities for the entire film. What cannot be denied is that all three of these examples give visual evidence of the ontologically-problematic characters in such a way as to prompt the spectator to view them as ordinary humans. One of the reasons why this problematic presentation goes unnoticed throughout these films is that the questionable status of these characters' ontologies is unknown not only to the spectator, but to the characters themselves. The spectator's misreading of the characters' ontological status is identical to those characters' misreading of their own ontological status. In the absence of explanatory causal information, it does not occur to the spectator to question the characters' ontological status any more than it occurs to the characters themselves. This is an extremely significant aspect of these films in that it reveals that the spectator and the character are on equal footing with regard to narrative information: the diegetic information relayed to the spectator is very closely linked to the diegetic information to which the characters have access. Known as alignment, this type of character engagement is a "process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel" (Smith 83). Alignment, as a strategy for

relaying diegetic information, can be a particularly useful tool for controlling the spectator's narrative knowledge and, therefore, their comprehension of a film. These films in particular use alignment in order to harmonize the narrative information known to the spectator with the information accessible to its characters.

Alignment: Spatio-temporal Attachment

One of the first ways in which these films align the spectator with the characters is through attachment. Attachment is “the way a narration may follow the spatio-temporal path of a particular character throughout the narrative” (Smith 142). Although attachment can be divided up amongst as many characters as populate the narrative, *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* all tend to attach primarily to one central character. All of the presented narrative events are closely connected to the space and time of this central character. In *The Others*, the narrative is mainly connected to the character of Grace. The film opens with Grace and, for the most part, follows her actions as she moves throughout the house, instructing the servants and interacting with her children. Only occasionally does the narrative abandon the immediate spatio-temporal coordinates of Grace and instead present the events immediately surrounding the children or, in very brief instances, the servants. Likewise, the events presented in the narrative of *The Sixth Sense* are chiefly those that have an immediacy for a single character, Malcolm, and his actions. However, in comparison to *The Others*, there is a bit more of a balance to the way that *The Sixth Sense* divides up narrative event presentation in relation to the characters. Although the narrative attaches primarily to Malcolm, it also attaches to Cole in several important instances. *Fight Club*, on the other hand, is very strongly attached to

a single character, Jack. Every single scene of the film is an event that happens in Jack's immediate time and space.

The effect of having an attachment to one or two primary characters is that these narratives privilege the particular actions and events directly related to those characters. As such, the information that the spectator receives is almost identical to the information received by the character to whom the narrative is attached. It is significant, then, to note that in all of these films, the primary character to which the narrative is attached is a character suffering from an incorrect understanding of their own ontological status. This goes a long way toward explaining why it is that the spectator does not have enough narrative information to inform him or her about the characters' true ontological status until the revelation occurs for that character. Since the character is labouring under a false understanding of their ontological status, it can be assumed that they have not had access to (or are repressing) information that would overtly reveal their true ontological status. As such, the privileged narrative information that is relayed to the spectator via attachment to the deluded character does not include any information that would overtly reveal that character's true ontological status. The degree to which these films mobilize around these characters can be seen in the way that the ontological revelation occurs at the same moment for the spectator as it does for the character.

Alignment: Subjective Access

Attachment is just one of the ways that *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* align the spectator with the characters in the narrative. Another, much more complex way in which the films of this study encourage spectator-character alignment is

through subjective access. Subjective access takes the idea of character-based mediation of narrative information a step further than attachment. Whereas attachment is used to judge the degree and balance of access the spectator has to the same spatio-temporal events as the characters, subjective access measures the “degree of access we have to the subjectivity of the character” (Smith 150). The films of this study are thoroughly invested in this type of narrative mediation.

The Others is a good example of a film that structures its narrative representations in connection with the subjectivities of its characters. The telltale sign of this is the fact that Grace, the children and the servants are all visually depicted in conventional ways despite the fact that they are actually non-corporeal, ghostly entities. Instead of presenting these characters as ghostly apparitions, the narrative presents them as though they were solid, physical entities. Inversely, the Intruders—the actual physical entities occupying the house—are not shown at all. Only slight traces of the Intruders’ existence render a mark in the world depicted by the film. Faint echoes of their footsteps, voices or piano-playing are the only noises of the physical world that are depicted. As well, the film only occasionally depicts the physical traces of the Intruders’ actions: the removal of the curtains, the unlocking of doors, and the opening of the piano. The fact that the film presents the actual, physical world as a series of discreet hints is telling. This type of representation is exactly the way the ghost-like entities—Grace, the children and the servants—experience the world. Bertha describes their subjective experience of the world of the living by telling Grace and the children that “Sometimes we’ll sense them and other times we won’t.” It is this ghost-world subjectivity that determines what is

visually represented in the film. It can be seen, then, that *The Others* heavily invests its narrative representations in the subjective experiences of some of its characters.

The narrative representations made in *Fight Club* are also linked to character subjectivity. In comparison to *The Others*, however, depictions of the world in *Fight Club* remain relatively unmediated. The one major mediating effect attributable to character subjectivity in *Fight Club* is the presence of Tyler. As a dissociated mental construct created by Jack, Tyler does not exist in the physical world. This means that any visual depictions of Tyler made in the film are false. However, the film does depict moments where Tyler addresses persons other than Jack and they respond. Tyler himself explains this when he tells Jack during the ontological revelation scene that “Sometimes you’re still you. Other times, you imagine yourself watching me.” The implication of this is that in these moments, Tyler’s personality takes over Jack’s body and Jack—struggling with his multiple personalities—rationalizes the situation to himself by imagining himself outside of his body, which is actually under the control of Tyler. Thus, any visual representations of both Jack and Tyler are examples of the narrative presenting events that are mediated by the subjectivity of the character, Jack.

The Sixth Sense is a much more complex case of narrative events being mediated by character subjectivity than either *The Others* or *Fight Club*. This is because the narrative gives the spectator subjective access to several different characters, all of whose subjectivities influence the representations in different ways. The first character whose subjectivity has a mediating effect on the narrative representations is Cole, a character that has the unique ability to see the ghosts of dead people. For the first half of the film, Cole’s ability to see dead people has no mediating effect on the narrative events. The

spectator sees the results of the alleged ghosts' presence—opened kitchen cupboards, Cole knowing about the executions held on the school grounds—but is never given representations of the ghosts themselves. As such, there is no evidence that supports Cole's attestation of his ability. Midway through the film, however, the narrative begins to become increasingly influenced by Cole's subjective encounters with ghosts. The first subjective mediation of the narrative occurs during a scene at a birthday party where Cole hears the voice of a deceased servant. This is a clear case of subjective mediation due to the fact that both Cole and the spectator can hear the voice of the deceased servant while all of the other characters cannot. Instances such as this occur much more frequently after this point. Back at home, Cole comes into contact with a number of other ghosts. Although these entities remain unperceived by characters other than Cole, the spectator is given both visual and auditory evidence of their existence. The fact that the spectator can both see and hear these beings that only Cole can see and hear makes Cole's subjective mediation of the narrative quite pronounced. The second character whose subjectivity has a mediating effect on the narrative events is Malcolm. The mediating influence that his subjectivity has on the narrative is evidenced by the visual representation of Malcolm. Malcolm, a ghostly entity, goes unseen by all of the characters in the film except for Cole. This could mean that Malcolm's representation is due to the mediating effect of either his own subjectivity or Cole's subjectivity. However, a clear sign that Malcolm's visual appearance in the film is due to his own subjective influence on the narrative is the fact that Cole's subjectivity only sporadically mediates the narrative. At the beginning of the film, the deceased beings that Cole encounters are not visually represented for the spectator. It isn't until midway through the film—when Cole reveals his secret to

Malcolm—that the spectator sees or hears these apparitions. This erratic access to Cole’s subjectivity suggests that the entirety of the narrative is not mediated by Cole. Rather, a second subjectivity, Malcolm’s, exerts an equal influence over the narrative. An important scene that explicates this situation is one in which Malcolm and Cole are walking down the school hallway and Cole sees the bodies of people that had been hanged in the school. An initial shot-reverse shot pattern of Cole looking at the bodies makes the bodies visually apparent to the spectator. However, a shot-reverse shot sequence of Malcolm looking in the same direction immediately after Cole reveals an empty hallway. These two sequences are followed by a shot in which Malcolm and Cole talk to each other while the place where the bodies were hanging takes up the frame behind them. In this shot, the bodies remain invisible. The fact that the ghost of Malcolm remains visible while the hanging ghosts are invisible suggests that Cole’s subjectivity is not the sole mediating force behind all of the narrative representations. If it were, then the hanged bodies would be as equally visible as Malcolm. Also, the hypothesis that Malcolm’s subjectivity is mediating the narrative is reinforced if one considers Cole’s attestation that the ghosts don’t see each other and that they only see what they want to see. Thus, Malcolm’s subjectivity would render himself visible, while the ghosts of the hanged would be invisible to him.

In comparing the two subjective mediations of narrative information in *The Sixth Sense*, it can be seen that they both operate in different ways. Cole’s subjective mediation of the narrative may be sporadic, but it is also much more apparent to the spectator than Malcolm’s subjective mediation. There are clear narrative cues that mark when the spectator is being given access to Cole’s subjectivity. Foremost of these cues is the

pattern of other characters denying Cole's reports of the presence of ghosts while the spectator is given visual evidence of their presences. The spectator can therefore clearly read this visual information as an instance where the narrative information is being mediated by Cole's subjectivity. Conversely, Malcolm's subjective influence over the narrative remains completely unnoticed by the spectator until the ontological revelation. This is because there are no clear narrative cues that mark the mediating effects that Malcolm's subjectivity has on the narrative. This situation is consistent with *The Others* and *Fight Club*. Although these films are heavily mediated by character subjectivity, this subjectivity is not clearly marked by the narrative. While this will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter, what stands out as significant is that, in all three of these films, a common operative principle is that the unmarked subjective influence over the narrative is by the character (or characters) who experiences the ontological revelation. This stands to reason on several grounds. First of all, these characters' subjective influence over their visual representation is necessary in order for their true nature to be hidden beneath the assumptions of the human schema. Secondly, the fact that the characters themselves aren't aware of their ontological status means that the narratives—which are attached to these ontologically-confused characters—cannot reveal (and subsequently mark) mediation of which the characters themselves aren't aware. This is why the influence of character subjectivities on the narrative isn't made fully clear to the spectator until the moment of the ontological revelation. It is at this moment that the characters themselves become aware of their subjectivity (which deluded them into an incorrect reading of their own ontological status). Therefore, it is only at this moment that the narratives can clearly

mark scenes as being mediated by the subjectivity of the characters with the confused ontologies.

Alignment and the Ontological Revelation

It is interesting to note how each of these films deals with character subjectivity during and after the ontological revelation. At these points in the narratives, the ontological status of the characters is being (or has been) disclosed to the spectator. This process gives the spectator a greater understanding of the mediating influence that the character subjectivity has had over the narrative. The spectator, knowing the true ontological status of the characters, has a much better ability to differentiate between real world representations and subjectively-influenced representations. The end result of this disclosure process is that the narratives of these films—no longer needing to mask the subjective mediation of the ontologically-confused subjectivities—have a great deal more freedom in regard to the representations they make.

A good example of this increased narrative freedom is the altered representational strategies that occur during and after the ontological revelation scene in *The Others*. During the ontological revelation scene, the mediating effect of the ghostly subjectivities (Grace et al.) begins to break down. As the children hide in the closet, hearing the breathing and voices of the Intruders, these cues are also apparent to the spectator. When the closet door opens, both the spectator and children see an old woman, a representation of the real world, unmediated by character subjectivity. Grace soon enters the room in which the Intruders have made contact with the children. In this scene, both the Intruders and the ghosts (Grace and the children) can be seen by the spectator. It is also made

apparent to the spectator that the ghosts can see the Intruders, while the Intruders cannot see the ghosts. This suggests that the representations made in this scene are a mix of both the actual world of the Intruders and the subjective world of the ghosts. The spectator, like the ghosts, can finally see the actual world: that of the Intruders. Unlike the Intruders, though, the spectator can also see the subjective world of the ghosts, wherein Grace and the children are visible. To punctuate the differences between the Intruders' actual world and the ghosts' subjective world, the narrative begins to alternate between the two worlds. Grace, enraged at the Intruders' suggestion that she and the children are dead, begins to shake the Intruders' table and tear up their paper and throw it around the room. These actions are shown both from the subjectively mediated world of the ghosts—where Grace grabs the Intruders' table and throws their paper about—as well as from the actual world of the Intruders—where the table and paper mysteriously start moving without any visible force exerting pressure on them. The scene ends with the spectator being shown the unmediated world of the Intruders as they recover from the shock of their ghostly contact. Although the narrative goes back to showing the subjective world of the ghosts without the Intruders, the final sequence of the film finally gives a visual representation of the ghost characters that suits their ontological status. Grace and the children stand at the window of their house, looking out. They suddenly dissolve into nothing as the camera pans out to show the Intruders packing up and leaving. This sudden visual dissolution of Grace and the children is a visual representation that is much more suited to their ontological status as spectres. Perhaps it is due to the fact that the characters are finally aware of their ontological status that their subjective mediation of the narrative allows for their representation in such a manner.

Changes in representational strategies during and after the ontological revelation scene can also be located in *Fight Club*. Up until the scene in which Jack figures out that he and Tyler are the same person, the narrative of the film is mediated by the subjectivity of Jack such that Jack's belief that he and Tyler are two different people is visually made manifest to both himself and the spectator. Jack and Tyler are seen as two separate, distinct persons. During the scene of the ontological revelation, however, this subjective influence over the narrative representation begins to collapse. This collapse is first seen in a series of flashbacks to earlier sequences in the film. These flashbacks depict events that had been shown previously, although heavily mediated by Jack's subjectivity. However, when these events are revisited as flashback inserts interjected into the ontological revelation sequence, Jack's subjective influence is gone. These scenes are shown as they would have actually taken place—that is, as they would have appeared to other people. Memorable scenes from earlier in the film such as Jack and Tyler's first parking lot fist fight, the kidnapping and threatening of the police diplomat, and Tyler pouring lye over Jack's hand are all shown again, albeit in a much different way. The parking lot fist fight is shown as Jack beating himself up, the kidnapping and threatening of the diplomat is shown to be orchestrated and executed by Jack and Jack is shown in an empty room, having poured lye over his own hand. The scene also features inserted sequences of events that hadn't previously been seen by the spectator, such as Jack having sex with Marla. Although the spectator hadn't seen the events featured in scenes such as this, these shots feature events that could not have occurred unless the presence of Tyler was a creation of Jack's subjectivity. Outside of the flashback inserts, there are other ways in which the subjective influence over the narrative representations breaks down in the

ontological revelation scene. In one sequence, Jack and Tyler are seen in the same frame, talking to each other. After a cutaway to Jack, a return to the previous two-shot frame reveals the absence of Tyler. Although Jack continues talking to Tyler, his subjective influence over the narrative presentation has been removed, leaving the spectator with an image of Jack talking to himself. After the ontological revelation scene, there are several other moments in *Fight Club* where Jack's subjective influence on the presentation is seen as collapsing. As Jack tries to get into one of the buildings that is going to be blown up, Tyler suddenly materialises in order to taunt Jack. Jack fires a gun at Tyler and Tyler suddenly disappears. Later on, as Jack and Tyler fight in a parking garage, cutaways of security camera footage show Jack being beaten but do not show his subjective belief that Tyler is the one beating him up. Instead, the lone figure of Jack is depicted, his abuse seeming not to stem from any separate, discernible source.

The Sixth Sense is an interesting film to compare to both *The Others* and *Fight Club*. While *The Sixth Sense* also uses flashback inserts in the ontological revelation scene to reinforce the knowledge of the characters' true ontological status, the film does not change representational strategies during or after this scene. Malcolm's representation remains constant throughout the film regardless of whether he is a live human being—as he is in the opening scene—or whether he is an apparition—as he is in all subsequent scenes. This visual presence in the film is the product of his subjectivity having a mediating effect on the narrative—an effect does not disappear even after it is revealed. Instead of removing this influence, the ontological revelation serves to mark the mediating effect of Malcolm's subjectivity. Thus, when the narrative presents flashback

inserts without removing Malcolm's subjective influence on the narrative, the effect is still marked and can therefore still be ascertained.

All of these instances of subjective access can be seen as a key part of aligning the spectator with characters, encouraging the spectator to view the world in the way that the characters do. Since the characters whose subjectivities have a mediating influence on the narrative representations are those that are suffering from an incorrect understanding of their ontological statuses, their views of their world are subsequently biased. By presenting the spectator with these biased interpretations of the world through subjective access, the narratives of these films are using the tools at their disposal to ensure that the ontological revelation is one for both the character and the spectator. This alignment is both triggered and reinforced by the processes of recognition that are inherently involved in any sort of alignment activities.

Conclusion

It can be seen, then, that the tools of character engagement—recognition and alignment—have an enormous impact on the narratives of these films. The way in which the spectator engages with and interacts with the characters presented in these films has a major impact on the way in which the spectator interprets the narrative cues. As such, character engagement can be seen as fundamental in establishing and carrying out the ontological revelation.

Chapter 3: Epistemological Positioning

Epistemology and Narration

Chapters two and three of this study have amply demonstrated that careful narrative choices have been made in *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* in terms of event presentation and character presentation. These narrative choices govern *which* diegetic events are displayed for the spectator. But it can also be claimed that these narrative decisions also dictate the specific *ways* in which these events are presented. These films amply demonstrate that careful control over both of these aspects of narrative presentation is required in order for the ontological revelation to be achieved. What is foregrounded by these films' tight control over the ways in which the events and characters are presented is that spectatorial comprehension is not solely determined by the narrative events presented. The *way* that these narrative events and characters are presented to the spectator also has a major impact on spectator comprehension. Generally referred to as choices of *narration*, these strategies for presenting events concern "how an event is presented, how it happens rather than *what* is presented or what happens" (Branigan 65). As such, it can be seen that strategies of narration have played an important part in the design and execution of these films with ontological revelations.

The reason why narration has such a significant influence on a spectator's comprehension of a narrative text is because narration "controls and limits the character of the visual access that we have to [a narrative's] fictional events" (Wilson 2). Narration, by both selecting which narrative events are presented to the spectator as well as *how* the events are presented to the spectator controls the access that a spectator has to the narrative events. This has an influence on the spectator's comprehension because

“perception must occur within boundaries and limits: perceptions of what *under* which conditions” (Branigan 86). Thus, a coherent narrational strategy of selection and presentation of narrative events serves to create “contexts... within which specific mental operations will be successful in organizing aural and visual data into a narrative pattern of events” (Branigan 86). By creating contexts in which narrative information is understood, narration can “structure an audiences’ overall epistemic access to narrative” (Wilson 3). This is true for all narrative films, but it takes on a special importance for films with ontological revelations. In examining the narration of films with ontological revelations, some overall patterns and global strategies of narration can be identified as working toward creating a specific epistemic situation for the spectator. The films’ myriad strategies of narrative presentation all work together to systematically create a particular epistemic situation that is necessary for the ontological revelation to occur. Furthermore, this epistemic situation can be seen as being unique to films with ontological revelations.

Choices of Narration: Limited Epistemic Position

One of the most salient aspects of the epistemic position that these films structure for the spectator through narration is severe limitation. *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* all demonstrate a concerted effort to restrict the amount of narrative information available to the spectator. The limitation of narrative information to which the spectator has access is not unusual since “every film necessarily controls and limits the character of the visual access that we have to its fictional events” (Wilson 2). In fact, this limitation of information is crucial to any and all narratives. Without the spectator lacking some narrative information, “there can be no possibility of narration since all

information is equally available and already possessed in the same ways” (Branigan 66). However, there are different degrees to which a narrative text can limit information. This continuum of information limitation can best be understood by examining Edward Branigan’s Levels of Narration schematic, which outlines different modes in which narrative information can be relayed to a spectator (Fig.1).

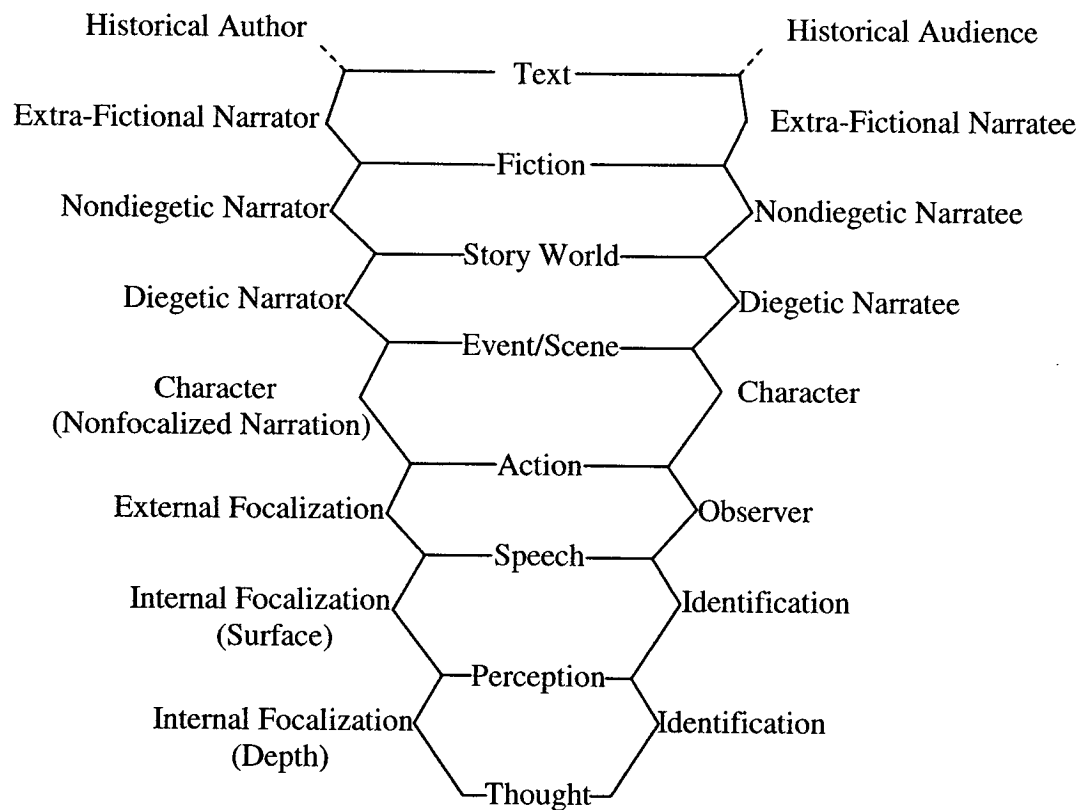


Fig. 1 Eight Levels of Narration (Branigan 87)

The centre column of this diagram displays the different modes in which the narrative events can be presented: the different levels of narration. These levels of narration are defined by the epistemological contexts featured on either side of the centre column. By positing the origin of the narrative information as issuing from one of the epistemic sources in the left column and therefore adopting the epistemic position in the

right column, the spectator hypothesizes the appropriate level of narration: the context within which the given narrative information can be properly understood. The diagram is arranged as a hierarchy in order to indicate the relativity of access to narrative knowledge as it relates to level of narration. At the top of the diagram are the levels of narration where a greater degree of narrative knowledge is accessible to those in the attendant epistemic positions. This degree of narrative information would not be accessible to those in lower epistemological positions, to whom the higher levels of narration are concealed. Thus, with each step down the hierarchy, access to narrative information becomes increasingly restricted.

Limited Epistemic Position: Alignment

One of the clearest ways in which the hierarchical aspect of narration can be seen as structuring a severely restricted epistemic position for the spectator of these films is through the films' strategies of alignment. Alignment—or more specifically, its sub-functions of spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access—can be seen to motivate the use of lower levels of narration which restrict the spectator's access to narrative knowledge.

As has been explored in chapter 2, all of the texts feature a high degree of spatio-temporal attachment to central characters. *The Others* is attached to Grace; *The Sixth Sense* is attached to Malcolm and, occasionally, Cole; *Fight Club* is attached to Jack. Most or all of the narrative events presented by the texts are those that occur in the immediate space and time of these central characters. This is a choice of narration that bears some investigation. Maintaining a strict spatio-temporal attachment to the

characters keeps the narration on the lower rungs of the hierarchy. This is because the narrative information available to the spectator in this situation is restricted to that which is available to the character. The spectator is thus encouraged to view the diegetic world in the same way that the characters do. By occupying an epistemic position to narrative information on par with that of a character, the level of narration encouraged by spatio-temporal attachment is most likely event, scene, or action. The epistemic position from which one views events, scenes or actions is several levels removed from the epistemic position from which all narrative information is presumably known: that of the author. Although the historical author cannot be derived/extrapolated from the text itself, the hypothetical position of the *implied* author—a name given to the epistemic position which has access to all narrative information and thus fashions the narrative for the spectator—can be helpful for understanding the processes involved in the narration of a text. This implied author—the hypothetical creator of the text—would have access to all of the narrative information of a text. As such, the implied author would not have to struggle with inferring narrative information, as is the case for a spectator presented with information solely from spatio-temporal attachment.

The restriction of narrational knowledge that results from spatio-temporal attachment can be seen as being active in all of the films in this study. In *The Others*, the spectator is unaware of the true nature of Grace and the ghostly presences since the only accessible narrative information is that which is available to Grace. As such, the spectator must work at speculating about the cause and nature of the ghostly apparitions in the house. The text does offer some useful narrative information on these matters when it occasionally abandons the attachment to Grace and focuses on the actions and dialogue

of the servants. In these moments, the spectator is given slightly more information about the nature of the Intruders. Despite abandoning the spatio-temporal attachment to Grace, these fleeting moments are designed to give scant bits of information that are not known to Grace. The other characters merely hint, enigmatically, about the true nature of the Intruders without offering a solid explanation. So although the film abandons its spatio-temporal attachment to Grace in these moments, they do little to put the spectator in an epistemic position that can give the spectator greater narrative insight. *The Sixth Sense* also exhibits this limiting effect of spatio-temporal attachment. By primarily focusing on events occurring around Malcolm, the film keeps the narration at the level of event/scene and action. Thus, the spectator remains at an epistemologically-restricted level on par with Malcolm. This is also the case for *Fight Club*, despite the fact that the film features a voiceover narration from Jack. It would seem as though a voiceover narration would place the spectator in a higher epistemic position since the narration would give the spectator insightful narrative information about the occurrences in the narrative. However, the voiceover rarely offers any narrative information that would put the spectator in a higher epistemic position in relation to the narrative events. The voiceover narration mostly offers information on Jack's feelings and thoughts regarding the narrative events. Although this is extra narrative information, it is about character emotions and thoughts, which reside lower on the hierarchy of narration. Another reason why Jack's voiceover narration can be seen as failing to put the spectator in a higher epistemic position in relation to the narrative information is because Jack is relating the events as he remembers experiencing them. He describes the narrative events from the point of view that he had while experiencing them. Thus, he is not offering any greater

narrative perspective on the events than is apparent through their presentation by means of spatio-temporal attachment.

While it can be seen that spatio-temporal attachment restricts the spectator's epistemic position by presenting events through lower narrational levels of event/scene and action, another aspect of alignment makes the issue much more complex. The mediation of narrative events by characters' subjective experiences of them—a key feature of all of these films—can be seen as placing the spectator in an even more restricted epistemic position than that revealed by spatio-temporal attachment. Although it is not apparent until the moment of the ontological revelation, the level of narration used to present the majority of events in these films would correspond to Branigan's category of *perception*. Perception is the most fitting category for describing the narration of events in these films because it corresponds to focalization, a narrative situation in which “a character's role in a narrative may change from being an actual, or potential, *focus* of a causal chain to being the *source* of our knowledge of a causal chain” (Branigan 101). The specific type of focalization featured in these films is internal focalization. Internal focalization refers to the spectrum of character-mediated narrative representations that “ranges from simple perception...to impressions... to ‘deeper thoughts’” (Branigan 103). In all of these films, internal focalization—the characters' subjective, internal impression of their world—serves as the primary source for the narrative information to which the spectator has access. *The Others* presents events of the narrative as they are understood by Grace, the children and the servants. This is why narrative knowledge of these ghostly characters is available to the spectator while narrative access to the corporeal Intruders is not. Likewise, Jack's impressions of the

narrative events in which he is involved guides the narration of *Fight Club*. This is why the spectator has access to narrative information about Tyler—an entity who only exists in Jack’s mind. The narrative events in *The Sixth Sense* are also presented to the spectator as they are understood by Malcolm. This is the reason why the spectator has narrative access to Malcolm but none of the other ghosts haunting Cole until Cole’s perception also becomes represented by the narration in later scenes in the film. This focalization of the narrative events through the subjectivity of characters is an effective tool for restricting the spectator’s access to narrative knowledge to one of the lowest levels in Branigan’s hierarchy of levels of narration. The reason why perception holds this lower position is because any narrative information available through character perception is severely restricted in terms of context. This narrative information is subjectively-rendered by a character that is, herself, epistemically restricted in terms of knowledge of the narrative relevance of their actions. When the narrative information presented to the spectator is focalized through the subjectivities of Grace, Malcolm and Jack—three characters unaware of their true ontological status and therefore unaware of the narrative relevance of their particular subjectivities—their perceptions cannot reflect the narrative importance of their subjective perspective or how that subjective perception has an effect on the presentation of the narrative events.

Due to its narrow contextual perspective, the choice of using the narrational level of perception to epistemologically limit the spectator’s access to narrative information can be seen as a contributing factor to the problematic systematicities of these films. Routing narrative information through the internal focalization of characters acts as a facilitating mechanism for the absence of important causal information. Upon closer

examination, it can be seen that the absent causal events are absent not only for the spectator, but for the characters themselves. In *The Others*, Grace and the children seem to be unaware of the events surrounding the murder-suicide. Malcolm in *The Sixth Sense* seems to be unaware of the events surrounding his death from the gunshot wound. *Fight Club*'s Jack seems to be unaware of the mental break that led to his cultivation of a second personality. It is important to note the exact nature of this absence of important causal information. Although the information is not immediately available to the characters, it stands to reason that this information had, at one point, been accessible to the character (or characters) in one way or another. Indeed, in a soliloquy at the end of *The Others*, Grace recounts the events of the murder-suicide, revealing that she had possessed knowledge of them. The flashbacks at the end of *The Sixth Sense* reveal Malcolm's knowledge of the severity of his gunshot wound and his death from it. In a similar way, the corrective flashbacks in *Fight Club* show that Jack had a deep-seated knowledge of the events that occurred when he was overtaken by the personality of Tyler.

What is similar about all of the missing causal information is that knowledge of the information was—at one point—possessed by characters, but was subsequently repressed for various reasons. There are textual cues, both explicit and implicit—that suggest this repression of narrative knowledge in all of these films. For the most part, *The Others* explicitly references the repression by the characters of the causal information of the murder-suicide. When the children first meet with Bertha, Anne cryptically refers to the missing causal information by saying “And then, it happened.” Up until this point, Grace and the children have been repressing this knowledge. When Anne breaks from

this code and refers to this impermissible event, her statements are quickly repressed by Nicholas, who denies anything happening at all. This repression of the causal information is thus reinstated and continues until Charles returns to the house and eventually confronts Grace about “what happened that day.” Charles persists with this line of questioning until Grace finally responds with deflections such as “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The most explicit narrative cue of the characters’ repression of the causal information occurs during the children’s contact with the Intruders at the séance. The old woman conducting the séance asks the children about how Grace killed them. Anne is immediately startled upon hearing someone directly referencing the causal information that occurred on the day that she and the others had repressed. After she collects her composure, Anne timidly approaches the old woman and whispers her recollection of the events in the woman’s ear. Anne glances at Grace with fear in her eyes as she whispers cautiously because she is still too hesitant to speak about these events openly. The old woman, having heard Anne’s admission of Grace brandishing a pillow, asks the children “is that how she killed you?”. Anne reacts with shock at this statement, despite having basically relayed the same information to the old woman moments earlier. The two children and Grace openly demonstrate the extent of their repression when they tear up the room shouting, “We’re not dead” repeatedly. The issue of repression is dealt with one last time before the end of the film. Grace, in her final soliloquy, discusses the events of the day and reflects on how—upon passing over into the spirit world and seeing the children appear to be alive despite their having been smothered—she deluded herself into thinking that it hadn’t happened at all. Although character repression of important causal events is not as explicit in *The Sixth Sense*, it still exists as a significant aspect of

the film. The film is littered with events that suggest the occurrence of an event or a situation that caused a rift between Malcolm and Anna. The one scene in which Malcolm discusses the change in his relationship with Anna, he speaks about it in third person indicating an unwillingness to confront the reason why they've grown apart. In this same scene, however, there is a more explicit nod to the mode of repression that occurs in *The Sixth Sense*. When Cole discusses his encounters with the ghosts of dead people, he makes the pointed statement "They only see what they want to see." Although, at this point, the spectator is unaware of the applicability of this statement to Malcolm, the same phrase is repeated in aural flashback during the ontological revelation scene. When the phrase is heard in this context, it is clearly meant to indicate that Malcolm, as a ghost, has repressed the events surrounding his death. *Fight Club*, like *The Sixth Sense*, features character repression of causal events in a more subtle way than *The Others*. Although Jack doesn't reference any missing events, a residue of the absent causal events manifest with the disjunctures that surface throughout the film. Moments when characters such as Marla or the Space Monkeys respond in a confused way to Jack's actions or dialogue suggest that events are missing. When Tyler finally explains the missing events to Jack as moments when the personality of Tyler has taken over Jack's body, Tyler describes Jack's situation as one of repression with the line "Naturally you're still wrestling with it, so sometimes you're still you." What all of these examples of character repression of important causal events demonstrate is how subjective access to characters' perception limits the spectator's epistemic position to narrative information. By presenting events through the narrational level of perception, the spectator's knowledge of narrative events becomes as restricted as that of the characters.

Choices of Narration: Unmarked Epistemic Contexts

While both spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access can be seen as effective tools for keeping the spectator in a restricted epistemic position in relation to the narrative, what is interesting is that they both offer different epistemic positions for the same narrative information. A spectator could interpret the events as being either on the level of event/scene, action or perception depending on whether or not the characters' subjective mediation is taken into account or not. What is foregrounded by these two conflicting accounts of the texts' level of narration is that the film image has no inherent epistemic properties. There is nothing about a film image that intrinsically signals to the spectator its particular level of narration or determines a specific epistemic position for the spectator. Any shot "can be differently described, and function differently in our comprehension" (Branigan 96) depending on the frame of reference the spectator applies to that shot. In fact:

In general, several levels of narration will be operating simultaneously with varying degrees of explicitness and compatibility; that is, the spectator may describe the text in several different ways, all of which may be accurate, each within a particular context and for a particular purpose (Branigan 96)

The lack of any determinate epistemic properties means that, when encountering a narrative text, the spectator is free to understand the narrative information within any and all epistemic frames of reference that prove to be suitable for making sense of that narrative information. This is why the different narrational levels of event, scene, action and perception can all be applied to the films of this investigation. As frames of

reference, they can each be used to make sense of narrative information presented in the films. Although the narrational level of perception stands out as the actual level on which the narrative events are presented—due to the fact that it is the only level of presentation in which the visible presences of Grace, Malcolm and Tyler are possible—it is still possible to make sense of the narrative information presented in the films by understanding them on the level of event/scene and action. Indeed, in all three films, this mistaken frame of reference functions adequately until the moment of the ontological revelation.

It is at the moment of the ontological revelation, however, that enough narrative information is given to mark the narrational level of perception that had been featured throughout the entire film. In *The Others*, the ontological revelation scene features quick, back and forth comparison cutting between the world of Grace and that of the Intruders and is punctuated with Anne's whispered confession to the old woman. This scene gives the spectator enough information to conjecture that the missing event that the characters had frequently alluded to was the murder-suicide of Grace and the children. With this as a starting point, the spectator can understand that the ghostly presences are actually Grace, the children and the servants—a fact that Grace and Bertha attest to in a later scene. This new understanding of the characters' ontological statuses also involves deducing that all of the narrative information that had been previously presented and understood as being presented on the narrational level of scene/event or action was actually presented on the subjectively rendered level of perception. This new epistemological context for the preceding information replaces the incorrect epistemological context that the spectator had previously engaged in order to understand the narrative information. *The Sixth Sense*

takes this disclosure of narration-marking information a step further during its ontological revelation scene. The narrative information that signals Malcolm's true ontological status is Anna's sleepily subconscious question to Malcolm of "Why did you leave me?" When Malcolm responds that he didn't leave her, she drops a wedding band on the floor. Malcolm, examining his own finger, discovers his wedding band missing. These two events, coupled with a voiceover flashback of Cole saying, "I see dead people. They don't know they're dead," offer enough information to signal that Malcolm's ontological status as a live human being is in doubt. The scene then proceeds by presenting flashback shots of various events that illustrate Malcolm's lack of presence as a ghostly apparition. By presenting these scenes again for the viewer, the film is allowing the spectator to understand these events as examples of the narrational level of perception. From these brief examples of recontextualization, the spectator can readily extrapolate that the true epistemic context of the majority of the film's narration is that of perception. Although *Fight Club* is slightly more explicit in its explanation of the characters' true ontological statuses, it utilizes some of the same narrational-marking techniques in its ontological revelation scene. While Tyler explains that he only exists as a fragmented offshoot of Jack's mind, the film features several flashback sequences. The spectator, upon being given the information that Tyler does not exist, can newly appreciate some of these sequences as being presented on the level of narration. However, *Fight Club* utilizes a further technique to demonstrate that the entire film had been presented on the narrational level of perception. Instead of simply calling attention to scenes that best demonstrate presentation on the level of narration, *Fight Club* revisits key scenes, but shows them as they would have appeared had they been presented on the level of

event/scene or action. Tyler's assertion to Jack, "Naturally, you're still wrestling with it. Sometimes you're still you," is accompanied by an alternate version of the scene where Jack and Tyler share a beer. In this new version, Tyler is missing but Jack is interacting with the absent Tyler as though he is actually present. Tyler continues this explication by telling Jack, "Other times you imagine yourself watching me." This is accompanied by an altered version of the scene in which Tyler explains the rules of fight club. This version shows Jack giving the rules of fight club without Tyler appearing at all. There are several more instances such as these where past scenes are re-displayed with these kinds of alterations. What all of these modified flashbacks demonstrate for the spectator is how the film would have appeared had it been presented on the level of event/scene or action. This further reinforces for the spectator the idea that the film, up until the point of the ontological revelation had been presented on the narrative level of perception.

Although the ontological revelation scene in each of these films demonstrates that the film had been presented on the narrative level of perception, it is not until this point in the films that the true epistemic context for the narrative information is known by the spectator. So while it can be said that the films present their narrative information on the level of perception, it is only by logical deduction that the spectator is aware of the proper epistemological context for the narrative information. This state of affairs raises the issue of how it is possible for these films to present narrative events on the level of perception without the spectator being aware of this. The first aspect of film that makes this situation possible is the lack of inherent epistemic properties to a film sequence. There is nothing intrinsic to a film image or its accompanying soundtrack that indicates the level of narration that is being used. However there are also several other strategies that can be

seen as preventing the spectator from correctly identifying the appropriate epistemic context for understanding the presented narrative information. The first strategy that these films employ to allow the spectator to adopt an incorrect epistemic context for the narrative information is the refusal to mark the level of narration. Film texts can—to different degrees of explicitness—provide the spectator with various cues that serve to mark the correct frame of reference for the narrative information. These markers can take the form of diegetic cues such as voiceover narrator dialogue explaining the frame of reference for a presented scene or other narrative cues such as a dissolve to mark the transition to a character's subjective flashback sequence.

A wide variety of devices are available to mark epistemic frames of reference for the narrative presentation of events. Out of all three of these films, only *Fight Club* displays any effort—however slight—to mark the epistemological context for the narrational information. The way that *Fight Club* could be construed as marking the level of narration used to present the narrative information is through the use of Jack as a voiceover narrator throughout the film. In one aspect, as a voiceover narrator, Jack could be considered a diegetic narrator, thus marking the level of narration as that of story world or event/scene. However, the fact that Jack's voiceover narration guides the spectator through the film in the form of a flashback signals that a different interpretation of the narrational level of presentation is possible. That the film is narrated in flashback is significant because “in its classic form, the flashback is...understood either as a story-being-told or a subjective memory” (Turim 1). The potential exists for a spectator, upon encountering a film presented in the form of a diegetic narrator's flashback, to identify the narration as that diegetic narrator's subjective rendering of events. Thus, there is a

possibility that the spectator could, indeed, identify the narrative information in *Fight Club* as being presented on the level of perception. The fact that the ontological revelation occurs for the spectator, however, suggests that this does not occur.

One of the reasons why the spectator is not inclined to read the flashback narration in *Fight Club* as a marker of the subjective narrational level of perception is because the entire film—up until the point of the ontological revelation—is internally focalized through Jack’s perspective. Internal focalization is a unique method for presenting narrative information in that—out of all the narrative levels of presentation—it requires explicit marking by the text in order to be understood as such. This form of narration requires marking because “the spectator’s recognition of a character’s awareness depends crucially on a *counterpoint* of character awareness with a *non-psychological* narration, such as a nonfocalized or even externally focalized narration” (Branigan 157). In order for the spectator to recognize the mediating effect that a character’s consciousness has on the narrative presentation of events, a contrapuntal epistemic context is necessary. The counterpoint epistemic context can provide the spectator with information about the focalizing character such as the character’s attitudes, behaviours, goals and mental state. This information may prove to be crucial for understanding how the character’s perspective skews the narrative information. Since the entirety of *Fight Club* is presented on the level of perception, the spectator is prevented from identifying this level on the basis of contrapuntal epistemic frameworks. Of significant note is that this narrative strategy holds true for both *The Others* and *The Sixth Sense* as well. Both of these films are presented entirely on the narrational level of perception, offering no alternative epistemic frameworks that would allow the spectator

to recognize this level. This is why an important aspect of films with ontological revelations is the strict limitation of the spectator's epistemic position by presenting events on the narrational level of perception. By only employing narration on the level of perception, these films are limiting the spectator's access to narrative information on other epistemological levels and are therefore preventing the spectator from realizing that the events are being presented on the level of narration. Especially telling is the fact that the first time any different epistemic frameworks come into play in any of the films is during the ontological revelation. In *The Others*, the ontological revelation scene cuts between the mediated level of Grace's perception and the unmediated story world of the Intruders. *Fight Club's* ontological revelation scene features several scenes on an unmediated level of event/scene or action. *The Sixth Sense*, in comparison to these two examples, does not present any scenes from an unmediated level of narration. The revealing of the narrational level of perception occurs when Malcolm—and subsequently, the spectator—has enough narrative information to recognize his mediation of narrative events. What is common to all of these examples is that any marking of the level of narration that would occur due to alternative epistemic boundaries is effectively excised from the films until the ontological revelation; the point at which the true epistemological context can be revealed.

Narrational Gaps: Spectatorial Assumptions and Conventional Comprehension

It can be seen, then, that these films go to great lengths to avoid marking the epistemic context of character perception, by which the bulk of the narrative information is presented. For this reason, the spectators of *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight*

Club are not likely to be aware of the fact that they are encountering images mediated by character subjectivity. Despite this lack of epistemic marking, however, the spectator still cognitively engages with these narrative passages. The spectator, in order to understand the presented narrative information, cannot help but assume an epistemological stance toward that information. With these films, the spectators can be seen as choosing to comprehend the narrative information within the epistemic context of event/scene or action. What this situation demonstrates is that, in the absence of explicit markers of narrational level, there is a default epistemic position to which the spectator routinely reverts. With each of these films, the spectator chooses to comprehend the narrative information as being presented on some sort of external, non-focalized level. There are several reasons why the audience is motivated to take for granted this epistemic position in relation to narrative images.

One of the first reasons why the spectator is influenced to view the narrative information as non-focalized is that a narrative text carries with it some conventionalized assumptions. When viewing a film, an audience is predisposed toward believing certain interpretations of events due to their own emotional bias and their understanding of a familiar narrative genre (Wilson 22). This aspect of comprehension tied to generic tropes can be seen as a factor that motivates the spectator to misinterpret the level of narration in *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club*. *The Others*' narrative takes the form of a conventional ghost story. Throughout the film, the characters make attempts to unravel the mystery of the ghostly apparitions. The spectator can easily recognize this traditional ghost story structure and thus engage the narrative schemata that commonly accompany such a structure. In the case of a ghost story, the spectator could predict that the narrative

would be driven by a search for the answer to the mystery of the ghostly presences and that the outcome of the film would furnish a solution to these mysterious presences. This conventional structure often results in the characters (and spectator) coming to a realization about the nature of the ghosts (or lack thereof). Using this structure as a basis for their comprehension of the narrative information in *The Others* would prove to be a successful diversionary tactic for the spectator. The spectator would be motivated to seek out clues as to the nature of the apparitions rather than the nature of the Grace or any of the other characters. This situation results in the spectator taking the characters' ontological nature for granted. With no reason to doubt the substantiality of the characters, the spectator would find it easy to assume that the appropriate epistemic context for understanding the narrative information regarding those characters would be external, non-focalized presentation. Much in the same way, the conventional structures at work in *The Sixth Sense* serve to influence the spectator toward viewing the narrative information as non-focalized. This film features Malcolm trying to help Cole with his puzzling "mood disorder". The first half of the film focuses on the relationship between Malcolm and Cole as Malcolm tries to understand the reasons behind Cole's erratic and self-destructive behaviour. This is a plot structure that can be easily identified as one belonging to the psychological drama genre. Using this genre as a template for expectations, the spectator could be motivated to focus on information that would help explain Cole's troubled demeanour and inexplicable actions. In the familiar narrative apparatus of the psychological drama, questions of the ontological nature of the characters are rarely at issue. Thus, there would be very little to motivate the spectator toward anything but a non-focalized presentation of narrative events. *Fight Club*, while

not a typical genre film, does utilize some conventional mores in its structure. By opening the film with a glimpse of the final, brutal confrontation between Jack and Tyler, the film is setting the viewer's expectations up to examine the flashback narrative for clues as to how their relationship devolved into such a violent altercation. This expectation of a final conflict between Jack and Tyler presupposes that the spectator does not question the existence of either Jack or Tyler. Thus, the spectator is dissuaded from understanding the narrative information as subjectively-rendered.

Another, perhaps stronger, reason for the spectator to assume a default epistemic position which views the narrative information as non-focalized can be seen as being rooted in the nature of the film medium itself. Although a spectator does not confuse the film world with the real world, comprehension of the events and existents of the film world share many perceptual and cognitive attributes with comprehension of the events and existents of the real world. In understanding a narrative, "we make connections and construct patterns by using references" (Branigan 192). These connections and patterns are organized by the spectator using various schemata. In utilizing these schemata in order to understand a text, the spectator is not making a connection between the film world and the real world, but rather constructing patterns of relations between narrative elements using schemata. However, the schemata that are used to comprehend film do come from a spectator's experiences in the real world. As such, they carry with them a core set of assumptions associated with real world experiences.

One of the most important assumptions that schemata carry with them in is that any images presented in a film are reliable and accurate. When watching a film, a spectator has "the overriding sense, somewhat naïve, that anything presented by concrete

imagery in a film actually happened, at least in terms of the filmic fiction's narrative truth" (Turim 166). Thus, there is a disinclination on the part of the spectator to distrust or second-guess any of the images presented by means of film. Instead, the spectator feels "entitled, throughout the film, to accept as given all of the information that it has been directly shown" (Wilson 40). This is why the spectator automatically assumes that narrative events in these films are presented on the level of event/scene or action. All of the characters with questionable ontological statuses are presented using concrete imagery. They seem—by all appearances given—to be live, stable, functioning entities. For the spectator to guess at the true nature of the characters' ontologies would require the spectator to distrust the images. In order for the spectator to realize that the narrative events are presented on the level of perception, they would have to see *through* the images and infer their actual status. Although this is possible, the spectator is more likely to accept the images as given and assume a default epistemic context of non-focalized narration. It can be seen, then, that these films capitalize on the spectator's habits of assuming validity and accuracy in the film image in order to motivate them to assume an incorrect, non-focalized epistemic context for the presented narrative information.

Conclusion: Ontological Revelations as Revelations of Narration

This epistemic situation—in which the spectator comprehends the narrative information using the wrong epistemological framework—is necessary for the ontological revelation to occur. By mistakenly understanding the focalized narration of perception as the non-focalized narration of event/scene or action, the spectator is unaware that the narrative information is mediated by a character's subjectivity. As a

result of this, the spectator draws incorrect conclusions about the ontological status of the characters. These conclusions are proven to be false at the moment of the ontological revelation. At this moment, the spectator is presented with different epistemological boundaries as well as enough narrative information to allow them to identify the correct epistemological context in which to understand the presented narrative events. By engaging the correct epistemic context, the spectator can retroactively recognize the character's subjective influence over the narrative events. This allows the spectator to re-evaluate those narrative events within the correct epistemic context, laying the base for a correct understanding of the characters' true ontological statuses.

It is this retroactive application of the correct epistemic context that differentiates films with ontological revelations from films with more commonplace plot twists. The revelation that occurs from the disclosure of key information in ontological revelation films is not just one of unexpected diegetic information. Instead, the revelation is one of narration. The spectator comes to realize that the problem was not that the information presented to them was incorrect, but rather that the way they were reading that information was incorrect. Once again, it is the contingency of the spectator's conclusions about the narrative that allows the spectator to rework the narrative information within this new epistemic context.

Conclusion

The recent cycle of films that feature an ontological revelation has afforded an interesting opportunity to explore the different ways in which a spectator utilizes narrative information in order to comprehend a film. The operative principal that is shared by *The Others*, *The Sixth Sense*, and *Fight Club* - the ontological revelation - can be seen as being more than just extra additional information in each film's story. It is information that requires delicate and complex strategies of narration in order for to be achieved. Although they manifest themselves in different ways amongst the three films, these strategies concern both the presentation of the events as well as the presentation of characters. In presenting their constituent events, these films subtly omit and delay the disclosure of key causal events that are crucial for understanding the true ontological status of the characters. Then, when presenting the constituent characters, these films avoid any manner of presentation that might reveal the characters' specific ontological status. Instead, they rely on fundamental aspects of spectator-character identification to mobilize specific sets of assumptions that are at odds with unconventional ontologies. The overall effect of these strategies of event and character presentation is to place the spectator in a specifically constrained epistemic position in relation to the narrative information. This epistemic situation is one in which the spectator is unaware of the true context in which the narrative information is being presented. As such, the spectator is likely to assume narrational contexts and, in doing so, misinterpret the presented narrative information, especially as regards character ontologies. The disjuncture between the spectator's narrative and narrational assumptions and the true narrative and narrational aspects allows for the ontological revelation to occur.

The exceptional epistemic situation created by these films is one that is of use to the study of film and narration. By demonstrating strategies through which a film can influence a spectator's comprehension, the importance of modes of narrative presentation can be carefully studied.

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