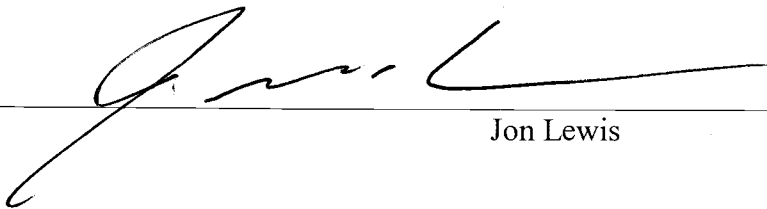# AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

James Anthony Wicks for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on July 20, 2005.

Title: "It was on the tip of everyone's tongue, Tyler and I just gave it a name": *Fight Club's* Representation of Consumer Culture

Abstract Approved:

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Jon Lewis

This thesis examines the representation of consumer culture in *Fight Club* within the context of Frederic Jameson's theory of postmodernism. I propose that the film represents consumer culture as a totalizing system. This representation is evident in the setting of the film and in the Narrator's attempt to escape from consumer culture. Within this framework for the discussion, I argue that the Narrator's initial attempts to rebel against consumer culture replicate, rather than change, the system he is trying to rebel against. I then place *Fight Club* within a taxonomy of films that represent consumer culture similarly, demonstrating that multiple postmodern films of the late 1990s question the degree to which escape and resistance is possible in a totalizing system.

"It was on the tip of everyone's tongue, Tyler and I just gave it a name":
Fight Club's Representation of Consumer Culture

by
James Anthony Wicks

A THESIS

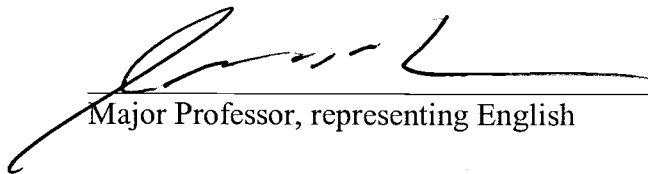submitted to

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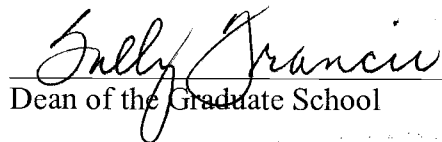presented on July 20, 2005.

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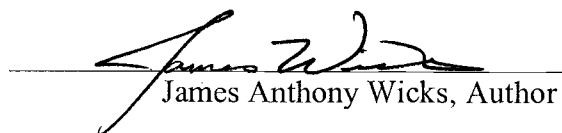
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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For Holly, River, and Abbey Wicks. I could not have written this without you.

Introduction

Fight Club in the Context of
Frederic Jameson's Postmodern Theory

"... the new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object -- the world space of multinational capital -- at the same time at which it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion." Frederic Jameson[1]

"I have no interest in making this anything other than what this book is, which is kind of a sharp stick in the eye." David Fincher[2]

Fight Club created a buzz that is not going away. It was the number one film at the box office at its release, and it is presently ranked the 37th most popular film of all time by users of the Internet Movie Database. Academics and film journalists continue to write about the film, and online discussion groups have consistently posted messages about the film for the last 6 years. By all appearances, *Fight Club* has exceeded director David Fincher's hope that the film would be talked about for years to come.[3] In my research, I have found that audiences of all types are compelled by the Narrator's attempt in the film to escape consumer culture.[4] For the film, based on Chuck Paluhniuk's novel of the same title, is all about escape from the totalizing system of consumer culture in the United States. The metaphor for escape early in the film is "sliding." When the unnamed Narrator (Edward Norton) enters his inner cave during a support meeting, his power animal, a penguin, says to him: "slide." And when his love interest Marla Singer (Helen Bonham-Carter) enters his subconscious cave, she says the

same. Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) says "let it slide" when he is about to let go of the steering wheel of their car -- just before the car crashes so that the Narrator may live through a "near life experience." By letting it slide the Narrator discovers a way to avoid what he considers the cookie cutter lifestyle that consumer culture had pre-arranged for him; as Tyler preaches: "let's evolve, and let the chips fall as they may."

Initial reviews of the film were both mixed and passionate. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun Times* gave the film a thumbs down: "it's macho-porn -- the sex movie Hollywood has been moving toward for years, in which eroticism between the sexes is replaced by all-guy locker-room fights [. . .] The fact that it is very well made and has a great first act certainly clouds the issue."[5] He continues: "Although sophisticates will be able to rationalize the movie as an argument against the behavior it shows, my guess is that audience will like the behavior but not the argument."[6] Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* disagreed. In her article "Such a Very Long Way from Duvets to Danger," she states:

> If watched sufficiently mindlessly, it might be mistaken for a dangerous
> endorsement of totalitarian tactics and super-violent nihilism in an all-out
> assault on society. But this is a much less gruesome film than (David Fincher's
> previous film) *Seven* and a notably more serious one. It means to explore the
> lure of violence in an even more dangerously regimented, dehumanized
> culture."[7]

The *Village Voice* took the middle ground between condemnation and praise in J. Hoberman's review: "David Fincher's *Fight Club* is not a brainless mosh pit. Nor is it a transgressive masterpiece."[8] He concludes that the movie is entertaining, but: "there's no search for transcendence here."[9]

Academia's response has been to further the claims of the initial reviews and build from them complex and interesting arguments regarding the film's representation of the postmodern condition. For example, Ebert's review is echoed in convincing ways by cultural theorist Henry Giroux.[10] Giroux's article on *Fight Club* was one of the first from the left, and each academic response since then has had to counter his strong bias against the film.[11] According to Giroux and other critics, the danger of the film is that consumer culture is portrayed irresponsibly; thus, the film does not function pedagogically as a progressive film.

Initially I planned to contend Giroux's argument in this essay.[12] However, I became less interested in convincing my audience that *Fight Club* is a progressive film after recognizing a pattern in *Fight Club*, and also in other late 1990s postmodern films. The pattern I discovered is that consumer culture is represented as a totalizing system, a system that valorizes conformity, a system that transforms human subjects into human objects before reincorporating them into a superstructure they do not control. In *Fight Club*, consumer culture is represented as a system in which one is trapped on all sides -- unless one finds a way to make a complete breach. In this discussion I argue that the totalization of consumer culture causes the Narrator's "spatial and social confusion," as Frederic Jameson describes in the epigraph.

A summary of *Fight Club*'s narrative highlights its representations of consumer culture. In the beginning of the film consumer culture is portrayed as it exists in the popular imagination -- as a culture in which one is identified by the products he or she owns. In the voice-over narration, the Narrator states: "I used to wonder what dining

set defines me as a person." In order to find peace of mind, the Narrator finds solace in support groups for ailments he does not have. It is while attending these support group meetings that he meets Marla Singer, another "tourist" like himself. Then the Narrator meets a soap salesman named Tyler Durden on one of his business trips. The underground boxing group that Tyler creates offers the next portrayal of consumer culture in the film. The Narrator's enthusiastic participation in these clubs initially offers him respite from the drudgery of his corporate existence and participation in global capitalism, but violence simply replaces the role commodities previously held in his life. Both commodities and violence subsume the Narrator's identity; each is inherently destructive to his psychological well-being. The next portrayal of consumer culture is evident in Project Mayhem, the fascist military group the fight clubs evolve into. The mind-numbing conformity imposed by Project Mayhem mirrors the way consumer culture stifles the identity of the Narrator in the beginning of the film. This stage in the diegesis, more than the others, is open for numerous symbolic and metaphorical interpretations because it is so unrealistic, exaggerated, and bizarre. At the end of the film the Narrator realizes that Project Mayhem subsumes men's identities, and that Tyler Durden is his alter-ego. In the final scene the Narrator confronts himself, a confrontation framed within a third space alternative to the rest of the film. It is at the conclusion of the film that the issue of escape from consumer culture is most clearly and completely explicated.

As this narrative summary reveals, it is fitting that this discussion take place by positioning the film in the context of Frederic Jameson's observations on postmodern

aesthetics and consumer culture. In *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson characterizes the postmodernist aesthetic as the absence of stability, the rejection of metanarratives, and the celebration of incoherence and fragmentation.[13] He then argues that these aspects of postmodern art reflect the ways that the modes of consuming, marketing, and selling commodities within the decentered global network of capitalism similarly removes social stability, rejects traditional value systems, and leads to an incoherent and fragmented culture.

Jameson's claim that consumer culture has propagated the commodification of nature and the unconscious is particularly pertinent to the discussion postmodernist works of art such as *Fight Club*. Since nature has been commodified, Jameson argues, the artist can no longer represent nature to the world in works of art. Instead, the artists of today have no option but to reflect the commodified world back to itself. And since our world is one of visual images, Jameson believes that postmodern art is a self-referential pastiche of images which disorientate rather than inform. Postmodern artwork thus demonstrates the present dialectical relationship between society and culture -- since our economic practices of consumer culture have altered, fragmented, and commodified nature and the unconscious, our artistic representations are inherently disorienting.

According to Jameson, postmodern works of art that inform instead of disorient, allowing subjects to regain the capacity to act and struggle, must truthfully represent the postmodern condition caused by consumer culture. *Fight Club* arguably enables subjects to regain the capacity to act and struggle by depicting the Narrator as one who

acquires a more complete perspective into the ways that global capitalism pre-empts his attempt to fathom his cultural and material condition. Fincher's portrayal of consumer culture is accomplished by using such artistic styles as pastiche, intertextuality, and aesthetic reflexivity -- artistic styles that Jameson believes have been influenced by the global forces of late capitalism. Thus, *Fight Club* is a film that demonstrates, on multiple levels, the effect of economic practices on nature and the unconscious.

Fight Club represents the absence of nature through the technique Fincher employs and the subjects he selects. The movie is disorienting in many ways: it is fragmented, shot with a range of camera angles, and it alters the order of events to break the semblance of narrative flow. Screenwriter Jim Uhls describes it this way: "the Narrator's disjointed nature is evident in the way the film flashes back, then flashes back further."[14] The style in which the film is shot is not without meaning. Film historian Geoff King, in his introduction to New Hollywood Cinema, observes that in continuity editing, which *Fight Club* does not exclusively employ, the "focus of the narrative is on the story, or narrative, rather than on technique."[15] Continuity editing leads one into the world of the film effortlessly. Each scene follows the other chronologically. When an actress looks across the room, the ensuing exchange shot presents what she is looking at. But when technique instead of continuity editing becomes the focus, the audience clearly recognizes the fabrication inherent to the creation of the film. This fabrication in *Fight Club* is latent with underexposed (dark) film, unsteady camera shots, and even scenes where film itself is filmed. Film as a

form is by nature absent from the space-time continuum, but Fincher accentuates the fragmentation.

With the illusion of CGI (computer generated images), Fincher takes the camera into places cameras can not go: behind refrigerators, through garbage cans, and between the basement walls of skyscrapers. He cuts on image, but leaves the music and voice-over narration going. The music is MTV-esque, and the camera often rolls (spinning around the subject as axis) and pans (spinning around a vertical axis). These and other signature traits by Fincher, served by cinematographer Jeff Cronenweth, represent the disorientation of the postmodern world. Geoff King believes that these types of film techniques are inspired by experimental advertising and video, which may include: "extensive use of back-projected images, the precise motivations of which are not always immediately clear; rapid shifts between different formats (including moves between color and monochrome and from 35 mm to 16 mm and Super-8), canted framing, [and] fast and slow motion."[16]

While there are two primary discursive spaces in the film, they are both set within an urban environment where nothing natural remains, except on the periphery. The first includes the Narrator's office, condo, and the hotel rooms where he stays while on business trips. Each of these rooms -- always interior spaces -- is brightly lit: usually painted white colors or a nearby shade, and very clean. This contrasts with the space of the bar and basements the Narrator frequents on the outskirts of town, and his dilapidated house on Paper Street. These spaces noticeably contrast, but both are clearly within the wasteland of the urban environment. Nature is nowhere to be found;

it has no function within the film as a space to be represented by art to the world.

Jameson writes that the last vestige of nature in the age of late capitalism is the

village.[17] So too, the only way nature appears in the film is when the Narrator

purchases commodities from the village periphery, such as drinking glasses made in the

"third world with bubbles in them to prove they were hand made."

So nature in *Fight Club*, in terms of Jameson's postmodern theory, is

commodified. Similarly, the unconscious in the age of late capitalism is commodified

and the representation of this is a central aspect of the film. In short, the conflict of

Fight Club concentrates almost exclusively on the state of the protagonist's psyche.

The narrative makes it clear that the individual subject disappears within the consumer

lifestyle, subsumed in the totality of dehumanizing economic practices. The Narrator

has no social network to come to his aid and he finds no meaning in his work. He is

alienated. Robert W. Witkin, in his work titled *Adorno on Popular Culture*, writes that

in the age of late capitalism:

> The process of production comes to be initiated, ordered and controlled not by
> the direct producers but by the production system that keeps them employed.
> Workers become 'appendages' to this system, estranged from the product of
> their labor. They do not choose it, nor does it express their social being. Work
> is progressively de-skilled and each individual performs routinized, atomized,
> and meaningless tasks at a pace and under conditions he does not control.[18]

This summary is an appropriate description of the Narrator's condition. As an

appendage of this system, the Narrator has no ability to make sense of his world, or

shape it. The strain of this causes the Narrator to suffer from insomnia -- an illness that

the film implies is caused by commodity culture. As Witkin states, "from here it is

easy to move into the Freudian realm of psychopathology and to see, from Adorno's

perspective, that psychoses and even illnesses such as schizophrenia can be assimilated to a discourse of capitalist economic relations and alienation."[19] This description may be suitably applied to the Narrator's condition of schizophrenia in *Fight Club*.

Jameson has stated that postmodern works of art represent the ways late capitalism commodifies nature and the unconscious. Fincher's intentional choices in the film reveal the absence of nature, while the events within the narrative represent the ways consumerism has infiltrated the unconscious. Fincher's portrayal of this on the screen is intentionally disorienting -- the most disorienting aspect lost on a majority of first time viewers is that the Narrator and Tyler Durden are the same person. But the reasons why the Narrator is disoriented are clearly revealed at the end of the film. When an audience understands the Narrator's condition, they participate in a new understanding of the film and their own condition, and as the epigraph states, they potentially: "grasp [their] positioning as individual and collective subjects." The politics of the film are revealed in this and other ways the narrative presents the Narrator regaining his capacity to act and struggle against the totalizing system of consumer culture.

Chapter One

The Narrative of *Fight Club*: David Fincher's
Representation of Consumer Culture as Totalizing System

The narrative of *Fight Club* contains many aspects of postmodern artwork, such as aesthetic self-reflexivity, fragmentation, and a rejection of orthodox conventions. For example, like 1999s immensely popular *The Sixth Sense*, *Fight Club* functions on two narrative levels. In *Fight Club* the first level of meaning is that the Narrator and his companion Tyler Durden start fight clubs in order to escape the monotony of a consumer lifestyle. In the second level of the narrative, one learns that Tyler Durden is the alter-ego of the Narrator, not a separate person.[20] The result is that the surface narrative must be reinterpreted by the new information supplied late in the narrative. Individual scenes in the film contain ambiguity to encompass both interpretations. In *Fight Club*'s car crash scene, for instance, Tyler Durden is driving the car, but after the crash one notices that the Narrator is pulled out of driver's seat.

Ira Nayman, in his *Creative Screenwriting* article "The Man Who Wasn't There: Narrative Ambiguity in 3 Recent Hollywood Films," claims that this form of storytelling is daring, uncommon in mainstream films, and "embraces the uncertainties of the world."[21] Referring to the 1990s films *Fight Club*, *Usual Suspects*, and *The Sixth Sense*, Nayman writes: "these films are connected in the way they defy clarity and embrace uncertainty; by the way they ask the viewer: 'Can you believe what you have just seen?'"[22] In *Fight Club*, Fincher leads viewers to understand that the unbelievable, uncertain, and unclear aspects of the film reflect, and are shaped by, consumer culture.

The implication of consumer culture is evident in the way the film depicts consumer culture as a ubiquitous and disorientating system.

As the film opens, a fleeting second of traditional cinematic orchestra music is ripped by the sound of a record needle swiping across a record. What follows is the adrenaline rush of the Dust Brother's soundtrack, replete with layers of synthetic sound recorded over electronic beats and bass lines. The camera then moves uncomfortably backwards through the Narrator's brain. Dendrites blaze while bolts of electricity and neurons scream across the screen. Since the film deals with the subjectivity, imagination, and creations of the main characters mind, these images form a fitting and logical starting point for the film. These images emphasize that the struggle of the film takes place within the Narrator's psyche. The camera travels through the Narrator's skull and skin, then down the long phallic barrel of the gun held by Tyler and forced into the mouth of the Narrator. The image fades-in. An establishing shot finally appears like out of a dream. Then the voice-over narration begins with the memorable line: "People are always asking me if I know Tyler Durden." The film then proceeds into a series of flashbacks, jumping backwards in time, with a few false starts, until the Narrator finds a place to begin his story. The film is fragmented, from the first 10 minutes of the film, like the psyche of the main character.

The first time the audience sees the Narrator within his consumer lifestyle, Fincher uses an aerial shot: the camera is above the Narrator's bed, as if it were suspended from the ceiling. The audience looks down on the Narrator, providing a perspective on where he exists in the space of the film. The Narrator says he can't

sleep: "with insomnia you are never really awake, and you are never really asleep." He says he is disoriented: "everything is just a copy of a copy of a copy" (as Jameson discusses in his work). The Narrator predicts that corporations, such as Microsoft and Starbucks, will name everything, providing an outlook for a future in which he will have little or no choice. Late night infomercials and purchasing products from catalogs do little to offer respite: "Doctor, I'm in pain," the Narrator says, despite having a good job and the accruements of a successful businessperson. The Narrator recognizes that he is suffering from something, but he seemingly has no idea what it is. At the suggestion of a doctor, the Narrator attends support groups to witness *real* suffering. Among victims of real disease the Narrator finds comfort because even though he does not understand the nature of his own illness, he recognizes that he needs the support of others. But Marla, by attending the same support groups for ailments she does not have, ruins the Narrator's dishonest attempt to escape the consumer lifestyle. Her lie reflects the Narrator's lie, forcing the Narrator to accept that, instead of "letting everything slide," he has discovered an inadequate way to ignore or elude the universal presence of consumer culture in his life.

However, when the Narrator meets the brash Tyler Durden on a business flight, everything changes. Tyler leads the Narrator to discover ways to sabotage and rebel. Tyler first complicates the Narrator's conception of consumer culture, and then leads him to understand that consumer culture is controlling him. When Tyler asks the Narrator to define who they are, the Narrator responds: "Consumers." Then Tyler states the first of several clichés in the film: "The things that you own end up owning

you." More interestingly, Tyler makes consumer culture uncomfortable. By urinating

in restaurant soup and splicing pornography into children's cartoons he makes the

consumer experience unpleasurable. By moving into Tyler's house, the Narrator

checks out of the consumer culture system almost entirely, abandoning electricity, TV,

and material comfort. And when the Narrator and Tyler fight, the Narrator realizes that

he has found a way that allows him to forget about the entrapments of consumer

culture. Only something as escapist, antagonistic, and outlandish as fighting is capable

of replacing the void the Narrator so completely feels. And it is here that one

understands why Fincher has often compared his film with *Trainspotting* (Danny

Boyle, 1996). The protagonist in *Trainspotting* turns to heroin to avoid a meaningless

life of purchasing goods. In the first scene of *Trainspotting*, Mark "Rent Boy" Renton

(Ewan McGregor) explains in a voice-over narration:

> Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking
> big television. Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players and
> electrical tin openers ... But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose
> not to choose life. I chose somethin' else. And the reasons? There are no
> reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?

Rent Boy, in Boyle's film, discovers a way to escape consumer culture that is so

extreme that he forgets everything about it. Similarly, the Narrator finds his own

extreme way to escape consumer culture when he is fighting. As the Narrator says:

"When the fight was over nothing was solved, but nothing mattered. Afterwards we all

felt saved."

The fighting allows the Narrator, as Mark Pettus writes in his article, "Terminal

Simulation: 'Revolution' in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*," to escape the "dominant

rules of economic space and time."[23] Each bloody fight serves to compensate for the Narrator's desperate and alienated life. At first the Narrator discovers that his work is endurable after fights, because after a fight "the volume is turned down," a metaphor the Narrator uses to explain that the dreary aspects of his occupation have become bearable. But the fact that the Narrator continues to work at his old job demonstrates that he has not made a complete lifestyle change, rather he has simply discovered a temporary form of escape that makes his existence endurable. But his escape is as dehumanizing as his consumer lifestyle. Pettus writes: the "rebellion of Fight Club against consumer culture ultimately fails because its challenge reproduces the system's models and values."[24] This is most evident in what fight club becomes when it reaches mythic proportions across the United States. Project Mayhem, originating from the so-called homework assignments of the fight clubs, becomes a national pseudo-fascist movement of terrorist cell groups. Pettus continues, "Project Mayhem is a movement that subsumes the identity of the individual subject (including Tyler Durden himself) and acquires an internal momentum beyond the control of the individual."

Tyler leads Project Mayhem with powerful rhetorical moves. He legitimizes privately held feelings, emphasizes the disparity between reality and expectations, and uses stereotypes.[25] For example, Tyler says: "We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off." By using folk arguments, combined with personal beliefs about possible solutions, Tyler conveys the message that he is a leader who possesses a "higher wisdom." The result is that

Tyler becomes an authority in the Narrator's life, and the authority for the army of

servants who participate in Project Mayhem. In a series of realizations that serve to

heighten the importance of the film's dénouement, the Narrator discovers that Tyler

controls every facet of his life: his time, his lifestyle, and his relationships. Tyler's

influence is everywhere. Thus, it is evident that Tyler controls the Narrator to the same

degree that consumer culture controls him early in the film. At the moment the

Narrator identifies Tyler as another source of his problems, everything starts to make

sense.[26]

In *Fight Club*'s final scene, the Narrator faces Tyler within an unoccupied

office, high above the city floor, as if suspended in space. Outside the window is a

world of high-rises. Inside, the Narrator sits confined to an office chair -- an ironic

representation of the way he was tied to his corporate lifestyle early in the film. Tyler

marches around him, lecturing him, just like his boss. Matching the dark mood of the

dialogue, Fincher lights the room a muted blue, a color that contrasts with the

white/black, light/dark discursive spaces presented in all other scenes in the film. The

lighting indicates that the final scene takes place in a third space. It is within this

tableau that the Narrator, although weak and vulnerable, takes the initiative to challenge

Tyler.

Tyler says: "Think of everything that we have accomplished, man. Outside of

these windows we will view the collapse of financial history, one step closer to

Figure 1. Viewing the collapse of financial history. Tyler (Brad Pitt) and the Narrator (Edward Norton) in David Fincher's *Fight Club*. (Warner Bros., 1999).

economic equilibrium." The Narrator is in a daze. He has just woken up from another beating -- a beating no longer cathartic as it was when fight clubs were new and seemingly therapeutic. Ironically the film purports that fighting is liberating, but this notion is clearly subverted at the end. The Narrator is so far removed from Tyler at this point that when they speak they are not communicating. One person's words meet the other at the wrong place. He says to Tyler, "No, I don't want this."

Tyler says, "We have to forget about you." Tyler has subsumed the Narrator's identity at this point to the same degree that consumer culture had suffocated the Narrator's identity in the first act.

But the Narrator takes responsibility for what he has done. Previously, he was a drone in the consumer world. Now he wants out of the entire picture -- consumer

culture, Tyler, and all. He says: "I am responsible for all of it and I accept that. So please, I am begging you. Please call this off." Tyler responds:

> How far have you come because of me? I will bring us through this. As always, I will carry you kicking and screaming and in the end you will thank me.
>
> Narrator: Tyler I am grateful to you. For everything you have done for me. But this is too much. I don't want this.
>
> Tyler: What do you want? Want to go back to the shit job, fucking condo world watching sit coms. Fuck you. I won't do it.

But the Narrator is beyond reconsideration. He makes no mention that he is going back to the "condo world." But he does know that he can no longer live with Tyler. The Narrator takes the gun, which was previously in Tyler's hand, recognizes it is in his own hand, and says: "Tyler, I want you to listen to me. My eyes are open." Then he shoots himself, eliminating his alter ego. Then the drums and familiar chorus of the Pixies song begins to play: "Where is my mind?"

This reading of the film's final scene reveals that the Narrator achieves a psychological stability that he does not posses at any other stage or space in the narrative. His breakthrough leads him to a liberating space outside of the totalizing system of both consumer culture, which he rejects early in the film, and the destructive world of Tyler Durden. Through Tyler, the Narrator expresses his desire to dominate women, enforce his will on the masses as an authoritarian leader, and perhaps even own material possessions that might satisfy instead of alienate. But Tyler's ideology never allows the Narrator to achieve a breakthrough into a liberating space outside of the

totalization of consumer culture. Instead, it provides an escape, a temporary

replacement.

Consumer culture and Tyler's world are two sides of the same coin. In Fight

Club, the men deal with each other in the same way that corporate culture deals with

them. And the rebellion of Project Mayhem mirrors the structure of commodity culture

because the members of this terrorist cell group replicate the dehumanizing practices

they experience at work. Their replication of consumer culture is evident in the way

they function as objects instead of subjects under the spell of Tyler's dogma, just as

they function as objects instead of subjects when they are termed "human resources"

instead of "human beings" in the corporate sphere. Thus, their rebellion is similarly

dehumanized. But when the Narrator accepts responsibility for his actions at the

dénouement, he accepts that Tyler was holding him down just as much as the things

Tyler was fighting against. The Narrator learns by the end of the film to reject

consumer culture as well as any form of rebellion that offers only temporary respite, or

rebellion that mirrors the system's inherent violence on the psyche.

This theory on the final scene of the film brings one full circle back to the

context of the postmodern discussion. One may wonder how Frederic Jameson

identifies his place within the confusion of postmodern existence, since he is within the

disorienting totality he describes. Similarly, how does the Narrator identify his

condition, and then, how do we? The implications and repercussions of this

observation have serious implications, and I think, especially for scholars within the

university. For a supposedly rebellious song on the radio, a film touted as subversive,

or even a film theorist's analysis which portends to be resisting the cultural hegemony, may very well be supporting the system the work or text claims to resist.

David Fincher has stated that *Fight Club* reveals his perspective on the relationship between advertising and culture in the United States. He first became interested in creating the film after a friend called him and described Chuck Palahniuk's novel over the phone. The story resonated with the director, particularly the scene in which Tyler threatens to kill the 7-11 clerk because the clerk does not actively pursue his goal to become a veterinarian. As he discusses on the DVD's commentary track, Fincher read the novel in one sitting and knew right away that he wanted to make the novel into a film. At first, Fincher was discouraged to learn that Fox Studios owned the rights to the novel, because Fox had edited his first feature film, *Aliens 3* (1992), to the point that it barely resembled his intention for the film. Fincher feared that Fox would edit *Fight Club* as well -- and he had no intention but to make *Fight Club* into "anything other than what this book is, which is kind of a sharp stick in the eye."[27] So Fincher made a proposition to Fox: he would direct the film, but only if it was on his terms. After working for one year creating the storyboard, writing the script with Jim Uhls (integrating over 22 pages of the novel directly into the script), and determining his cast, Fox approved. Said Fincher:

> We could have made it a three million dollar or five million dollar *Trainspotting* version, or we could do the version where planes explode and it's just a dream and buildings explode and it's for real -- which is the version I preferred to do -- and [Fox] backed it.[28]

Perhaps due to the autonomy given him, Fincher has repeatedly stated that the artistic

freedom he had over this film was one of the best creative experiences he has ever had.

Fincher believes that the film proposes that commodities create the people,

rather than people create commodities. In several scenes, including the scene in which

Tyler threatens the store clerk, product placement is accompanied by acts of violence.

In his own words, Fincher's intent was to let his audience understand in a visual

representation that we are "by-products of the system," in order "to let us know who we

are."[29] Fincher's statement is qualified by the fact that he had directed commercials

and had started his career as a MTV video director, including directing videos for

Madonna. Although creating commercials was not his end goal in visual media, it

allowed him to get hands-on experience in the industry so that he could make films he

cared about. Through this process he developed a recognizable style, including

complex and innovative opening credits, displayed in such films as *Seven* (1995) and

The Game (1997), and after the release of *Fight Club*, in *Panic Room* (2002).

One of the most famous scenes in *Fight Club* that displays Fincher's fascination

with representing consumer culture is the early scene when the Narrator walks through

his condo while CGI makes it appear that he is walking through an IKEA catalog. In

this scene, the Narrator's consumer choices most clearly affect his character,

personality, and how he identifies and defines himself.[30] The author of the novel,

Chuck Palahniuk, put it this way in an interview following the film's release:

> In the U.S. we really don't have a rite of passage from adolescence into
> adulthood except through acquiring accoutrements -- your home, your car, your
> washer-dryer. That's how you become an adult in America. There's a quote in
> the book: "I've seen the strongest, smartest generation in all of human history,

and they're working in the service industry." And I just felt enormously
disappointed in myself and most of my peers; despite all of the things we'd been
raised with -- good nutrition, good health, the best education -- what had our
lives amounted to? [. . .] All of humanity has come to this point, and this is the
best we can do with it?"[31]

Both Palahniuk's novel and Fincher's translation of it make it clear that the transition to

adulthood in our culture, and the evidence of success, is defined by the products one

owns. Neither in the novel nor in the film does this notion lead the protagonist to

happiness or emotional well-being. This notion is then reinforced in the film when the

Narrator walks within in the catalog of his apartment to a refrigerator full of

condiments, but without food.[32] A life within consumer culture, then, is represented as

one in which one is with material possessions, but without psychological, mental, or

spiritual substance.

Chapter Two

"The things you own end up owning you":
The Centrality of Consumer Culture in *Fight Club*

> The solution, however, lies not in the masculine or patriarchal paradigm of
> targeting consumerism as one more macho enemy; rather, the solution lies in
> turning to right -- rational justice and eco-social responsibility -- not to battle
> consumerism, but to *abandon* it, to begin increasingly making (individually,
> nationally, and globally) other, non-consumerist kinds of choices, within the
> web of relationships that constitute our earthly communities of life.
> Michael Clark[33]

In a response to postmodern culture in the aftermath of 9/11, cultural theorist

Slavoj Zizek has written that the "necessities" that a consumer purchases are often

without substance: "on today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of

their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without

alcohol ... And the list goes on: what about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin

Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties [. . .]"[34] Material products have become

signifiers without the signified. So it is interesting to consider that a commodity

without any "real" substance is like a Hollywood film without an accurate or "real"

depiction of life in a capitalist system. At times our commodities are not real,

postmodern lifestyles and our spectacles are not real, and Hollywood depictions are not

real:

> [I]t is not only that Hollywood stages a semblance of real life deprived of the
> weight and inertia of materiality -- in late capitalist consumerist society, 'real
> social life' itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our
> neighbors behaving in 'real' life like stage actors and extras .... Again, the
> ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian despiritualized universe is the
> dematerialization of 'real life' itself, its reversal into a spectral show.[35]

Zizek's examination of consumerist society highlights the Narrator's predicament in *Fight Club* -- the Narrator leads a life without substance, just as the products he consumes are without substance. In fact, each of the choices and actions the Narrator makes throughout the film reveal the ways that consumer culture influences his material condition. For example, after attending fight clubs, the Narrator becomes a producer of commodities, rather than a consumer of them, demonstrating a reversal of his place in the consumer order. He makes soap, a fascinating product because the Narrator makes it from human liposuction fat. Thus, he alters consumer waste into something functional and useful. Its importance is highlighted on the movie poster: the title "Fight Club" is carved in soap. This binary of waste and utility carries a distinct consumer message, for what consumer culture has wasted can be made useful again.[36]

At the point in the narrative when the fight club is still a promising alternative to the Narrator's corporate lifestyle, the Narrator and his *doppelganger* engage in a revealing conversation in the bathroom of their run down house in the abandoned industrial outskirts of the city. In the establishing shot, Tyler sits in an old fashioned claw foot tub, only his face and bronze muscular shoulders visible. The narrator sits, skinny and pale, on the floor in the foreground, leaning against the wall that frames screen left. Next to the Narrator's head, a strangely phallic broken toilet paper dispenser protrudes from the wall. In this scene there is no shot-counter shot. This informs the audience that the scene is from the perspective of the Narrator, for the Narrator is never seen from the perspective of Tyler. The lighting is a classic Fincher

Figure 2. Tyler asks, "If you could fight anyone, who would you fight?" The Narrator would fight his boss. (Warner Bros., 1999).

muted yellow. And the color of the room is dominated by darkened off tones of maroon rust and green mold.

Tyler asks, "If you could fight anyone, who would you fight?" The Narrator says that he would fight his boss, and then he asks Tyler who he would fight. Tyler says that he would fight his father. Then the narrator responds, "I didn't know my dad. I mean, I know him, but he left me when I was like six years old [. . .] He would do this every six years: he goes to a new city and starts a family." Tyler scoffs in one breath, then summarizes in the next: "the fucker is setting up franchises."

Although the Narrator and Tyler are the same person, most viewers up to this point are not aware of this, and only understand that the characters have established some sort of intimate relationship which would allow their meeting in the bathroom together. However, the gender issues that are apparent in the scene do not over-ride the centrality of the theme of consumerism within this conversation: "Franchises," Tyler

says. Their lives are so intertwined with consumer culture that that Tyler interprets

reality in capitalistic terms. Kevin Alexander Boon, in his article, "Culture and

Culpability in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club,*" explains the Narrator's father in this

way: "[he] had been consumed by the capitalist impulse toward production; families are

his product."[37] When the Narrator's father destroys the family by neglecting it, leaving

it discarded, a capitalist word is used to define it. And whether or not the reply was

glib, the term "franchise" has a distinctly corporate edge and carries a particular

intended effect.

Later in the same scene, when discussing marriage, the Narrator says "Married,

I can't get married, I'm a 30 year old boy." Then Tyler philosophizes "We're a

generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is what we

need." But is this remark anti-feminist?[38] Alexandra Juhasz, in her article, "The

Phallus Unfetished," argues that it is not. She claims the movie was one of her favorite

feminist films of 1999, along with *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*: "It turns out

that most men are women in the current world order, not because of what they *have* --

balls or breasts, no matter -- but because of what they *lack*: immediate access to their

own masculinity."[39] The lack of masculine traits in the men of *Fight Club* is evident

when the Narrator attends self help groups. Juhasz, quoting the film, writes:

> "At least we're still men," snivel the divorced, bankrupted, pathetic members of
> the testicular cancer survivors group -- Remaining Men Together -- who make
> up the community where Jack hopes to begin to eradicate the feminine within.
> "Yes, we're men. Men is what we are." But we all know they're not; they're
> hugging crying, whining, and one even has breasts. ("Bob. Bob had bitch
> tits.")[40]

The "Remaining Men Together" group meets in a darkened gym where an American flag is prominently displayed in the background. It is implicit that the conflict in the film is one particular to males in the United States. From the economic perspective in which the film is framed, these men represent those who have been emasculated by consumer culture. [41]

In the process of questioning our patriarchal economic system, gender stereotypes are concurrently questioned in *Fight Club*. The challenge to typical heterosexual depictions of gender identity is facilitated by the Narrator's search for an alternative to his consumer lifestyle. Thomas Peele, in his article "*Fight Club*'s Queer Representations," writes:

> Thus, while Giroux may be correct that this film is misogynist, this film is also queer. The film does not simply denigrate women (if that is in fact what it does), it also suggest the possibilities for an eroticized, pleasurable queer space where men don't have testicles and where women have penises. [42]

Perhaps the most revealing homo-erotic scene in the film is the post-coital smoke after the Narrator and Tyler have their first fight: the Narrator says, "We should do this again sometime." Another is the already mentioned gun that Tyler forces into the Narrator's mouth at the beginning/end of the film. These representations in the film erode stereotypes associated with issues of masculinity in the United States, even though the film proves to value hegemonic masculinity at the conclusion of the film.

When one analyzes the gender discussion and the violence in the film, it is important to remember that the central theme of consumer culture's negative affect on society is difficult to see when the film interjects the stereotypical values of our patriarchal system. For example, the Narrator calls Bob's breasts "bitch tits." Such

raw line delivery and expression could easily lose otherwise sympathetic viewers. This was a gamble Fincher was apparently willing to make. Traditionally, empathy and consumerism are linked to the feminine, and the film does little or nothing to alter this stereotype. Not to mention that the role of women in the film, which is nearly nil, clearly reflects asymmetrical power relations. When recognizing these qualities in the film, one must keep in mind that these representations of consumer culture in the film also reflect the conditions of our capitalist economic order.

The character Bob is an excellent reference point in the film when navigating through the space of issues of gender and violence in order to realize the ways that the film maintains its focus on the issue of consumer culture. Bob is a likeable character, and the most developed besides the Narrator, Tyler, and Marla. The Narrator meets Bob at the support group which allows the Narrator to escape the alienation he feels, and the members of the support groups allow him to speak because they believe the Narrator has a similar ailment. At the support group when he meets Bob, the Narrator lets go of the frustration that he feels and he cries in Bobs arms. The Narrator's emotional release is significant because he feels comfortable to reveal his emotions to Bob. This contrasts with his workplace, an environment depicted as unconcerned with the Narrator's emotional well-being.

The audience learns that Bob is a former body builder who bought into the consumer cult of self-improvement. Bob claims that he was one of the late night infomercial salesmen who advertised a new way to purchase a muscular physique. In order to have a perfect body, Bob explains that he took steroids, but the whole process

backfired on him. He loses his job, family, and friends, in addition to his testicles/

masculinity. By participating in consumer culture, Bob loses everything that identifies

him as a man, husband, father, and friend. So while gender issues are crucial to the plot

of the film, and as much as the issue of masculinity in the film can be accurately read as

a response to the rise of feminism in the United States in the later part of the 20th

century, it is important to recognize that the cause of Bob's gender crisis is consumer

culture.

Kirster Friday's insightful essay on the film, "A Generation of Men Without

History': *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom," argues that the gender

issue in the film "shows how *Fight Club* is much more than a reactionary assertion of

masculine, gender politics. [...] the collapse between identity and symptom is both

necessary and inevitable, because it is through the symptom that the subject comes to

be at all."[43] The symptom she refers to is consumer culture. After all, the politics of

our economic system is connected to the politics of patriarchy; the Narrator expresses

his association of the capitalist economic system and patriarchy in his desire to fight

both his boss and his absent father.

Bob also navigates the audience through the space of violence in the film. After

the Narrator has been a member of the fight clubs for some time, he bumps into Bob on

the street after a support group meeting. Like some type of zealous convert of a cult,

Bob tells the Narrator about the fight clubs. Bob, like the Narrator, finds escape from

consumer culture in fighting. The nocturnal fights symbolize a way power relations are

enacted on them during the day at their redundant and unfulfilling jobs. Within the

fight clubs, the constrictions society imposes seem to disappear. The question each person asks, "Who am I?" is suddenly and clearly answered -- "I am the one who will take on anyone."

In consumer society, withdrawal into privacy is yet another commodified experience: consider the price to purchase a home gym workout center, or even spending hours on the internet. These experiences engender privatism and do not provide fulfilling social outlets. But Bob finds a way out of his commodified, alienated, and private world when he discovers a collective experience at fight club. The Narrator explains it this way: "Who you were in fight club is not who you were in the rest of the world." Rather than being an isolated cog in which power relations are acted upon him, Bob and the other men directly enforce their power relations when they fight. Power exchange is evident on the screen in many scenes in which there is a tight frame of shot. For example, when the Narrator's boss confronts the Narrator about fight club, he stands in the doorway of the Narrator's cubicle in the office, cramping the space of the screen, and heightening the Narrator's subservient position. The Narrator is also included within the frame of the screen during these exchanges -- he sits while the boss stands and addresses the Narrator's poor behavior.

The fight scenes themselves are presented as intellectualized power exchanges. The Narrator's voice-over narration describes the feelings he has when he participates in a fight: "Fight club wasn't about winning or losing. It wasn't about words. The hysterical shouting was in tongues, like at a Pentecostal Church." Even though the violence is aestheticized and stylized, the voice-over narration leads audiences to

interpret the visual images with meaning and a more comprehensive understanding of the events. This intellectual delivery of the fight scenes contrasts with a typical Jean-Claude Van Damme film, such as the 1980s underground fighting championship film *Bloodsport*, which features a *Rocky*-esque conclusion. The repetition of the fighting presented in an intelligent way throughout *Fight Club* offers a persistent appeal for the audience to consider that the violence itself also plays an important role in the film.

The violence in the film serves a number of functions. As stated earlier, the fighting becomes a metaphor for any type of escapist alternative to dealing with the reality of our consumer lives. Fincher has stated:

> I always saw the violence in this movie as a metaphor for drug use [. . .] what you're trying to show in the character is that he has a need. There's sensuality to this need and there's sensuality in this need being fulfilled. So maybe that's wrong, but it's the only way to help talk about it. The violence gives him [Norton's unnamed character] the pain he feels. You're talking about a character who's ostensibly dead. You're talking about a guy who's been completely numb. And he finally feels something and he becomes addicted to that feeling. He has a need to feel, and that need is fulfilled by the fight club. So there's a kind of parallel in a weird way to people who disappear into drugs.[44]

On another level, fighting demonstrates that the narrator must make a violent breach from his present lifestyle in order to gain a clearer depiction of where he exists within the consumer order. Within the space of this film, some sort of violence is required to split the Narrator apart so that he can see himself for who he really is. Zizek writes that the violence in the film abolishes the distance between entrapment and liberation: "Although this strategy (i.e. fighting) is risky and ambiguous (it can easily regress into a proto-fascist macho logic of violent male bonding), this risk has to be assumed -- there is no other direct way out of the capitalist subjectivity."[45] While this perspective

is particularly bold and not universally accepted, another way to understand the role of

the violence in the film might be to consider Zizek's interpretation of the phenomenon

of cutting:

> far from being suicidal, far from indicating a desire for self-annihilation, cutting
> is a radical attempt to (re)gain a hold on reality, or (another aspect of the same
> phenomenon) to ground the ego firmly in bodily reality, against the unbearable
> anxiety of perceiving oneself as nonexistent.[46]

Each of the theories on the violence in the film determine fighting to be pathological

behavior. They also recognize that the Narrator inflicts violence on himself in order to

risk feeling real, alive, and even normal. Most significant is that these theories

demonstrate that the Narrator resorts to violence in response to the conformity

consumer culture imposes on him.

Film censors found it difficult to accept the violence in the film, especially the

extended violence in the last fight club bout in which the Narrator destroys the face of

"Angel Face" (Jared Leto). Fincher agreed to shorten the scene, but explained that it

was his intention to leave the scene as long as possible. In subsequent interviews,

Fincher stated that the initial version of the scene did not include the reaction shots of

the crowd shuddering in disbelief: as the crowd within the scene observes the Narrator

pounding Angel Face's face into the concrete floor, the crowd first stops what they are

doing when they recognize the brutality, then they look carefully again to see if they

can believe their eyes, and finally they shudder and a few of them turn their eyes away.

Fincher noticed with screening audiences that the more he interjected the response of

the crowd within the scene, the more the live audience in the theatre recognized how

horrible the fighting is. The question could be then, is there an alternative way that

Fincher could have conveyed the fact that violence is terrible? One response could be that the film as commodity may have necessitated violence in order to attract an audience to this film. Even so, Fincher's inclusion of reaction shots situates the film's most violent scenes within a larger critical context.

On a final note regarding the presentation of violence in the film, the setting of the fight clubs is always within underground spaces of the film. It is a space of detritus, poor lighting, and chipped paint. This is because the fighting is incompatible with the clean space of the business office, a place where no physical pain is associated with work. Psychologically, the underground and decadent spaces of the fight club represent the Narrator venturing into the darkest parts of his psyche to discover what is there and who he is. When he goes underground, it is as if he is going into his soul. As an audience, we are taken into the interior state of the protagonist. Consider the scene in which Marla converses with the Narrator and Tyler calls up from the basement to provide the answers for him -- those are the answers coming from the interior of his mind, from his basement. The bombs in the basements, at the end of the film, could then possibly represent the explosions going off in psyches across United States urban spaces, psyches awakened out of capitalist subjectivity.

Fincher took great risks when he chose to introduce a gender discussion only to privilege patriarchy at the end of the film, and when he chose to aestheticize the violence in his film. While the film's representation of consumer culture is particularly intriguing and its politics progressive, multiple readings of the film have accurately identified the film's most troubling and conservative representations. For these

reasons, the film has been the focus of criticism. Film theorist Christopher Sharrett, in

his article "End of Story: The Collapse of Myth in Postmodern Narrative Film," writes:

"[*Fight Club's*] style supports a far-ranging set of concerns -- the emasculated male,

consumer capital as cannibalistic, the female as specter haunting the remains of male

privilege."[47] Sharrett continues: "Its very disjunctive style seems suitable for the film's

free-for-all survey of neurotic postmodern consumer/ media society. The film's kick is

the roller coaster through this illness, not a critical exposition of it."[48] Sharrett

concludes that Fincher's presentation of masculinity and violence serves more to

entertain, rather than offer a materialist view of reality.

Perhaps the most accurate way to evaluate the film is to both carefully consider

the film's noteworthy and intelligent portrayal of consumer culture, and learn from the

film's affirmations of stereotypes. In "*Fight Club*: Historicizing the Rhetoric of

Masculinity, Violence, and Sentimentality," Suzanne Clark writes: "It is possible to

argue that *Fight Club*'s satirical edge helps make associations of masculinity and

violence more visible and even to critique them."[49] To the film's credit, its significant

detractions do not occlude its portrayal of consumer culture. The film demonstrates

that in our consumer culture an organic, integrated society is not evident. In

postmodern American life, where there is a dematerialization of the economy, where

money is now electronic, and where materials shift from production of objects to signs/

information, film like the other arts has turned into a style or aesthetic. The economic

and the aesthetic have joined, as it were.[50] But Fincher risks a new metanarrative. In

the film he implicates consumer culture as the symptom, and that radical rejection is

possible if one can determine a way outside of the totalization of consumer culture and

the rebellious responses that sustain it.

Chapter Three

***Fight Club* and late 1990s Postmodern Film**

In retrospect, the ways *Fight Club* functions within the larger genre of

postmodern film clarifies the way it both succeeds and fails to provide a historical and

materialist portrayal of escape from, and rebellion against, the postmodern condition. It

fits within a group of films that similarly portray nature and the unconscious as

commodified, and our society as a totalizing system. A number of films contemporary

with *Fight Club* could be accurately termed postmodern, such as *Run Lola, Run*

(Tykwer, 1998), and *Donnie Darko* (Kelly, 2001), films representative of postmodern

theory because they, like *Fight Club*, blur the boundary between media formats, retell

their stories from different perspectives, and effectively abandon the linear story telling

method. Frederic Jameson has written about *Body Heat* (Kasdan, 1981), a remake of

James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*, in which intertextuality is deliberate.[51] Jameson

argues that *Body Heat* is a postmodern film because it displaces "real" history by re-

depicting the aesthetic affect of the original film, rather than depicting history

accurately. Recent David Lynch films such as *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland*

Drive (2001) deconstruct metanarratives such as those proposed by Freud. In fact,

Mulholland Drive concludes without revealing the identity of the two main characters

-- it is like *Fight Club* without the dénouement.

As the intent of this section of this essay is to cite films that effectively

represent our postmodern age of late capitalism a totalizing system, I am avoiding those

films that may be defined as postmodern for their self-reflexivity or intertextuality

alone. One example of this could be *Shrek* (Adamson, 2001). In this film the ruling ideology of original fairytales is made fun of and roles are reversed. But as Zizek puts it:

> Instead of praising these displacements and reinscriptions too readily as potentially 'subversive' and elevating Shrek to yet another 'site of resistance', we should focus on the obvious fact that, through all these displacements, *the same old story is being told.*"[52]

Representations such as these contain the irony typified with postmodernism, but they maintain the ideology of the dominant order, even if having a bit of fun at its expense. Again, citing Christopher Sharrett:

> The cinema of postmodernity suggest a society no longer able to believe fully its received myths (the law of the father, the essential goodness of capitalism, the state, religious authority, the family.) *Yet it is also unable to break with these myths in favor of a historical materialist view of reality.*[53] (italics my own)

In contrast, postmodern films that represent the totalization of consumer culture perhaps do offer a way to understand our cultural condition in a historically materialist manner by depicting our own condition accurately, in a way that allows us to consider the space we navigate daily.

The taxonomy of films I propose in the remainder of the essay exhibit styles or techniques that could be termed postmodern because they either demonstrate the fragmented state of the protagonists psyche, or they clarify a particular aspect global capitalism as elucidated in Jameson's postmodern theory. More importantly, these are films that signify that we are living within a totalizing system. Robert Stam, in *Film Theory: An Introduction*, writes, "At its worst, postmodernism reduces politics to a passive spectator sport where the most we can do is react to pseudo-events [...] through

polls or call-in tabloid news programs. At its best, postmodernism alerts us that new times demand new strategies."[54] It is in the spirit of the later, as has been the emphasis of this essay on a whole, to identify films that alert us that new strategies are in order.

In the science-fiction film *Dark City* (Proyas, 1998) the commodification of nature and the unconsciousness is as important in the film as it is in *Fight Club*. In *Dark City*, humans live in a dense urban metropolis where Strangers -- aliens from another solar system -- study humans without the humans ever knowing they are under the microscope. The Strangers study the minds of the humans by placing them into staged scenarios in order to see how each person will react. The main character of the film, John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell), is an object of such a study. The crux of the film is that Murdoch realizes that he exists within an environment in which every move he makes has been choreographed and predetermined. Murdoch even realizes that there is no way to escape the city in order to find comfort beside the ocean in nature. In one scene, Murdoch's psychologist (Keifer Sutherland) says: "There is no ocean, John. There is nothing beyond the city. The only place home exists is in your head." At the end of the film, Murdoch destroys the Strangers by using the mental powers that he acquired with each of his new realizations throughout the film.

The theme of escaping an existence one learns is commodified is exemplified in another film released concurrently with *Fight Club* in 1999, the fifth highest grossing film of that year, *The Matrix*. In this film by the Wachowski Brothers, the protagonist named Neo (Keanu Reeves), a rebellious computer hacker in his free time, learns that his existence is a virtual reality controlled by computers. Neo meets a man named

Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), the leader of a group of commando soldiers, who

informs Neo that the "Matrix is the wool that has been pulled over your eyes -- that you

are a slave." It is fascinating to consider that Neo's rebellion as a computer hacker does

not subvert the system, because even this supposedly deviant act is positioned within a

system he has no opportunity to change as long as he remains within it. The behind-

the-scenes view of reality in the film, the scenes that present human beings as batteries

connected to wires within the system, offer a particularly extreme vision of humanity

trapped within a totality in which change seems impossible. In order to escape the

Matrix, the protagonist must discover a way to frame his actions outside of the confines

of the system that controls him.

The violence in *The Matrix* is brilliantly choreographed in the style of John

Woo films and Hong Kong cinema. But unlike *Fight Club*, the presentation and style

of the violence detracts from the film's theme that there is an alternative existence more

meaningful than one in which every facet of reality is controlled by an intricate system.

The glorification of violence in *The Matrix* is particularly troubling in the scene in

which Neo wears a trench coat and fires a submachine gun identical to those used by

the students at the Columbine High School shootings that occurred concurrently with

the film's release. Unfazed by the danger all around him, Neo coolly fires round after

round while pop music glamorizes the scene. Thus, behavior that should be eschewed

is exemplified. But even with this significant distraction, there is a consistent pattern

evident in *The Matrix* that is in parallel with *Dark City* and *Fight Club*: it seems that at

this time in United States history, the idea that we are living a false existence is a

powerful theme. In the world of these films, the unconscious is entirely commodified, and escape is only possible after one recognizes that one's actions are predetermined when one exists within a totalizing system.

While *Dark City* and *The Matrix* are science fiction films set in the future and are part of the science-fiction genre, I would also like to highlight two "straight-laced" films, as Sharrett would call them, that comment on the postmodern condition. These films, also positioned within consumer culture, use techniques that are more realistic and employ a more orthodox narrative format. The first is another 1999 film, *American Beauty*, directed by Sam Mendes. The connections between *American Beauty* and *Fight Club* have been analyzed by many journalists and academics who note the similar undercurrents of an anti-consumerist, and even subversive, message in both films. At the beginning of *American Beauty*, Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) informs the audience that he is dead -- that the story about to unfold has already transpired -- but that he was actually dead long before in the stifling and dull monotony of his middle class business lifestyle. This critique of consumer culture in *American Beauty* is echoed in other 1990s films that similarly depict the office environment as a confining space. While this representation is humorous in the cult-hit *Office Space* (1999), in which the protagonist decides to simply stop going to work, the corporate environment is depicted as completely claustrophobic in *Clock Watchers* (1997), in which female office workers can not wait for the work day to end so that their real lives can begin. The women in *Clock Watchers* spend their days at work staring at the clock on the wall as time painfully stands still.

The film *American Psycho*, directed by Mary Harron and released in 2000, depicts consumer culture in an almost unimaginably debased way. The main character, initially presented in many ways similar to the yuppie Narrator in *Fight Club*, struggles with issues of masculine identity in consumer culture. *American Psycho* begins with the voice-over narration of Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) describing the myriad of consumer products he uses daily. With a hint of sarcasm, he states: "I believe in taking care of myself, in a balanced diet, in a rigorous exercise routine. In the morning, if my face is a little puffy, I'll put on an ice pack while doing my stomach crunches. I can do a thousand now." He also describes his perfect job as a businessman in Manhattan, but nothing satisfies him. The frustration of his life of boredom and excess leads him to develop two identities. One identity satisfies the expectations of the upper-class society he is a part of: it is calm, a mask of proficiency and control. The other side of his identity satisfies his need for escape and release: he is a serial killer. Bateman reveals: "I have all the characteristics of a human being -- flesh, blood, skin, hair -- but not a single clear, identifiable emotion except for greed, and disgust. Something horrible is happening inside me and I don't know why."

Bateman claims that violent release is the only way that makes him feel satisfied and alive. Harron's film depicts Bateman casually murdering people in his spare time, one at a time -- the random underprivileged street person, but usually women he is casual acquaintances with. The commodification of Bateman's existence neutralizes him, and has taken over him so completely that it is as if he is not even there, even when he kills. In his words:

> There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman; some kind of abstraction. But there is no real me: only an entity, something illusory. And though I can hide my cold gaze, and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable... I simply am not there.

Bateman speaks about himself as if he is an object. The fact that he is dehumanized by his environment, and that he treats others similarly without humanity, is clear. At the end of the film he confesses to his lawyer, but his lawyer does not believe him. No one cares. His life of commodity fetishism, and working-out to have a perfect physique, is suffused with excess, despair, and boredom. The only way he feels alive is to transgress civic boundaries. In the end, he gets away with it unpunished. The audience is led to understand that society is complicit with his choices.

American Psycho, with its many similarities to *Fight Club*, and its dark representation of the postmodern condition, leads me to conclude that several late 1990s films realized Jameson's hope that one day political art in the postmodern era would allow us to "begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion." These films contain intriguing conceptualizations of consumer culture. And they are films that present their protagonists and narratives in more than reactionary and apolitical ways. *Fight Club* positions the protagonist in a conflict where the antagonist is in a large part the totalization of consumer culture. The Narrator's psychological and intellectual conflict is to identify where he exists within the system, and then find a liberating space outside of it. In *Dark City* and *The Matrix* we find a similar pattern. On close inspection, the representation of totalizing systems in these films leads us to consider our own historical and material condition more

carefully. For at times we find a startlingly clear reflection. And while not utilizing the experimental techniques of *Fight Club*, the portrayal of consumer culture as a totality in *American Beauty* and *American Psycho* identifies the cultural condition as our own by their titles alone.

After all, the representation of the setting as a totality in *Fight Club* and these other films is absolutely essential. In *Fight Club*, if we were to align ourselves with the protagonist's world view when he is participating in fight clubs, then we condone behavior that is intrinsically dehumanizing. But if we take the opposite stance, and support the consumer culture and say, "the Narrator should simply get over it. Look at his privileged life... Why should he complain?" then we find ourselves complicit with a system that corrupts the protagonist. Fincher places us in this awkward position if we follow the film to its logical conclusion -- both positions are not really opposed to each other, because they are both a part of the same condition, the postmodern condition. In order to escape this dilemma, and simultaneously oppose both positions, we must, as Zizek writes: "resort to the dialectical category of totality: there is no choice between these two positions; each one is one-sided and false."[55]

Conclusion

Beyond *Fight Club*

Initially, I was concerned with defending *Fight Club* as a progressive film

because I was intrigued by the ways its depiction of consumer culture eludes

reification. The original drafts of this essay separated the film's progressive aspects

(corporate existence is slavery) from its conservative aspects (praise of individual

achievements and misogyny), in order to conclude that overall the film is progressive,

sometimes even in spite of itself. But the more I participated in the discussion, the

more I became fascinated with the film's depiction of consumer culture itself, and less

interested in how I might convince my audience that the film is progressive. My

fascination was piqued by discovering a similar depiction of consumer culture in other

late 1990s postmodern films, and this provided the inspiration that I needed to write this

essay. By positioning my discussion within Jameson's observations on postmodernist

aesthetics and Zizek's theory that postmodern culture is a totality, I believe that it is

clear that these films possess pedagogical value, not because they are progressive films,

but because their representations of consumer culture provide a way to analyze the

dialectical relationship between our economic system and the artwork our culture

produces.

I do not agree entirely, however, that consumer culture in our society is

identical to its depiction on the screen in these films. In my research I found

convincing academic articles that identify the possibility for political action, successful

rebellion, and fulfilling lifestyles within the space of consumer culture. And from

personal experience, I understand that the space of consumer culture that I navigate daily can be more complicated than its depiction as totalizing system. It is difficult for me to consistently recognize that consumer culture is a dystopic superstructure when there are things about it that I like, such as enjoying a sense of accomplishment that results from completing a group project at the office where I work, shopping for my family, or taking pleasure in collecting certain commodities such as CDs and books.

But I believe that the depiction of consumer culture as totalizing system is essential, even critical, to understanding the social confusion that seems inherent to postmodern life. It is crucial that these films depict consumer culture as a totalizing system because the depictions allow us to conceptualize the universalization of capitalism. These depictions provide a framework to understand the negative affect of our economic system on human behavior. As Jameson succinctly puts it, "in my opinion, it is diagnostically more productive to have a totalizing concept than to try to make one's way without one."[56] To conceive of consumer culture as a totality helps us understand what is going on. Since global capitalism is an abstraction, seemingly everywhere and nowhere, it is an accomplishment worth noting that these films invent, and then project, what Jameson would term a "cognitive map" so that we can comprehend, and hopefully change, the aspects of our society that dehumanize, decenter, and transform human subjects into human objects.

The space I am considering now is beyond *Fight Club*, outside of the totality the film depicts. So it is difficult to write this without the image of *Fight Club's* final scene in my mind: the Narrator, united with Marla, stares at the city's financial structures

crumbling to the ground. When I think of the Narrator at the end of the film, finally outside of the binary system that traps him throughout a majority of the narrative, I find hope in imagining that there is a place for him that exists outside of the totality he struggles against. Ideally, this is a space where new metanarratives might be risked, and where collective social action -- rather than corporate domination and individualism -- might be privileged. Although I am not certain exactly where this line of thought will lead, my hope finds its beginning in the intriguing, sometimes strange, and sometimes haunting representations of the totality in the postmodern films I have described in this essay. These films have demonstrated that there is the possibility of a third way -- that the rejection of our totalizing system is possible.

Notes

[1] Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 54.

[2] Doogan, "Todd Doogan Interviews David Fincher," http://www.the digitalbits.com/articles/fightclub/fincherinterview.html.

[3] David Fincher, *Fight Club*, DVD audio track.

[4] By the logic of the film, following consumer culture's pre-arranged paths -- from childhood to maturity -- do not lead to a satisfying life. The Narrator graduated from college, found employment in a respectable occupation, and purchased commodities fitting with his yuppie lifestyle, but it ultimately leads him to despair. Or worse, to feeling nothing at all. His life is similar to his description of insomnia: "neither awake, nor asleep." The fight clubs he attends awaken him from this quandary.

[5] Ebert, "Fight Club," http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article? AID=/19991015/REVIEWS/910150302/1023.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Maslin, "Fight Club," http://www.nytimes .com/library/film/101599fight-film-review.html.

[8] Hoberman, "City Limits," http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/9942/ hoberman.php.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Giroux holds that the central theme of the film is masculinity. Other articles have since referenced Giroux's, but have emphasized different central themes. Kirster Friday, in her article "A Generation of Men Without History": Fight Club, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom," argues that the central theme of the film is the desire for the protagonist to discover his time and place within the timelessness of postmodern existence. Her essay, like this thesis, draws heavily from the ideas of Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Zizek. Other writers have focused on a particular facet of the film in order reveal how the film portrays culturally relevant topoi. Alexandra Juhasz uses such an approach to analyze the placement of dildos in *Fight Club* in order to reveal the film's feminist politics. Stacy Thompson's article on punk cinema locates the film's "nominally anti-commercial ideology," evident in Tyler's production of soap, in order to claim that the audience/ consumers of the commodity *Fight Club* are moved to further consumption rather that to act against capitalism and materialism.

[11] Eric Weiner's article in *JAC* entitled, "Making the Pedagogical (Re)Turn: Henry Giroux's Insurgent Cultural Pedagogy," contains an excellent summary of Giroux' response to *Fight Club*: "[Giroux] argues that the film is driven by an investment in individualism, a construction of masculinity that relies on violence and misogyny for its sense of agency, and a total disregard for 'social, public, and collective responses' to the increasing callousness and alienation of market-driven social policies. Posing as a socially engaged film, *Fight Club* ends up 'reproducing the very problems' it attempts to address. By employing a transgressive aesthetic, films such as *Fight Club* romanticize violence, racism, and sexual abuse (among other anti-democratic practices) in the name of creative freedom, progressive politics, and entertainment. Generally denying any relationship between entertainment and public pedagogy, Hollywood mystifies the role it plays in encouraging the affective investments we make, our occupation of narrowly conceived subject positions, and our individual and collective attitudes and behaviors toward difference." Weiner, "Making the Pedagogical (Re)Turn," 439.

[12] My contention with Giroux's argument is bolstered by compelling critical analyses of the film. Suzanne Clark convincingly writes, in her article "Fight Club: Historicizing the Rhetoric of Masculinity, Violence, and Sentimentality": "[Giroux] argues that indeed the film represents a new totalitarianism because it satirizes self-help groups and offers no remedy for corporate oppression. I do not agree with Giroux entirely, however. It is important to think about now gender conventions operate historically and how they are mobilized in the film" (413). In this statement, Clark intends for her readers to realize how the film has the potential to shift audience consensus so that they can look at reality in a new way. Similarly, each of the most intriguing articles on *Fight Club* seem to recognize that the film has the potential to shift audience perspective. Clark's summary of the response to *Fight Club* is excellent: "Many of the reviews of *Fight Club* have noted that the film has prompted debate. Whether that debate functions to enhance or to erode democratic exchange depends on the differing receptions of the audience to masculinist and sentimentalist rhetoric and the differing results of appeals to pain. Young audiences -- male and female alike -- love the film" (418). Clark recognizes that there was potential for the film to go both ways: certainly reification is a possibility. In the spirit of her article, this thesis recognizes the ways *Fight Club* prompts debate, and remains optimistic that an audience will discover the appropriate response to the film's politics.

[13] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 400. Jameson references Ernest Mandel's three stages of capitalism: stage 1: market capitalism, stage 2: monopoly capitalism, and stage 3: late capitalism/globalization.

[14] Jim Uhls, *Fight Club*, DVD audio track.

[15] "The conventions of continuity editing generally serve to focus attention on the story, or narrative, rather than on technique. The implications of this are considerable. The impression given is that the world in front of the camera unfolds naturally and effortlessly. We are given what usually appears to be immediate access to the fictional world of the film. The fact that all of this has been carefully fabricated, down to the last camera position and cut, is obscured." King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, 38-39.

[16] King, *New Hollywood Cinema*, 252.

[17] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 34.

[18] Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, 3.

[19] Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, 4.

[20] I have discovered a commonality among academics who consider the film anti-consumerist: they each highlight implications of the fact that the Narrator and Tyler are the same person. Geoffrey Sirc, in his article "The Difficult Politics of the Popular," states that Tyler is actually part of the consumerist system he ostensibly opposes: Tyler "chooses to enter into the violence and hate and drama and lies to search out some point of real feeling and truth" with an attitude of "consumerist culture's end-logic, the Final Clearance: 'Everything must go!'" (427). Pam Zipfel, in her article "Fight Club: Male Identity in the Culture of the City," asks: "How radical does a modern, urban man have to be to discover who he is? Tyler responds, 'Self-improvement is masturbation. Maybe self-destruction is the answer.' Fight Club, in its totality, begs to disagree." (5) In short, each of these assessments of the film recognize that Tyler is a part of the corporate system, rather than its antithesis.

[21] Nayman, "The Man Who Wasn't There," 60.

[22] Nayman, "The Man Who Wasn't There," 57.

[23] Pettus, "Terminal Simulation," 122.

[24] Pettus, "Terminal Simulation," 111.

[25] Simons, "Requirements, Problems, and Strategies," 393.

[26] In the montage scenes towards the end of *Fight Club* the audience learns that the Narrator and Tyler are the same person. This reveals a special knowledge that those watching the film for the first time are unaware of. In such a way *Fight Club* is like

other cyber-age films that contain an element of interactivity with their audience. Film scholar Dana Polan, in his assessment the postmodern pastiche film *Pulp Fiction*, writes that a postmodern interactive film contains: "a continuous shifting of tones and transitions between levels that requires constant spectator alertness; an unpredictability of narrative lines that likewise encourages active anticipation and hypothesis-forming; a seductive blurring of the boundaries of illusion and reality [. . .] images that seduce the eye by their visual richness; likewise, images that are constantly in motions [. . .] a wise-cracking knowingness that makes audiences feel they're in on a cool joke with the protagonists." Polan, *Pulp Fiction*, 38.

[27] Doogan, "Todd Doogan Interviews David Fincher," http://www.the digitalbits.com/articles/fightclub/fincherinterview.html.

[28] Doogan, "Todd Doogan Interviews David Fincher," http://www.thedigitalbits. com/articles /fightclub/fincherinterview.html.

[29] Fincher, *Fight Club*, DVD audio track.

[30] It is interesting in these scenes that the Narrator is always alone, rather than a member of a social network, such as a group of co-workers who go to a pub after work. This representation of the Narrator demonstrates that the Narrator is an atomized particle in the capitalist machinery; he is isolated by a system that has individualized workers within corporate industry.

[31] Boon, "Culture and Culpability in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*," 274-5. Chuck Paluhniuk as quoted in the Mike Brown Interview.

[32] "In one notable sequence in Fincher's film, for instance, consumer items instantly 'appear' in the narrator's condominium as he mentions them by name, and periodically, throughout his narration, brand names intrude, Delillo-like, into his consciousness. Similarly, the constraints on any kind of Jamesonian cognitive mapping of this temporal 'present' or space are conveyed stylistically, rendered in Fincher's film through its somber, caliginous lighting and ubiquitous anonymity." Friday, "A Generation of Men Without History," http://0muse.jhu.edu.oasis.oregonstate.edu/ journals /postmodern_culture/v013/ 13.3friday.html.

[33] Clark, Michael J., "Faludi, *Fight Club*, and Phallic Masculinity," 74.

[34] Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 11.

[35] Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 13-14.

[36] The relationship between commodity and consumer is key to this inquiry into the film because the Narrator in *Fight Club* arguably defines himself by the products he purchases. A commonality I discovered in Friedman, Ward, Witkin, and Zizek, is the theory that alienation may result when one defines him or herself by consumer products, rather than by defining him or herself by participation in a social network with accompanying cultural traditions. Consumers who desire products that have no real use in their lives are living with false needs -- and false needs can lead to a misconstrual of reality. Because utility is no longer the motive of this type of consumer, commodities are reduced to signs whose referents have disappeared. See esp. Friedman, "Introduction," 7.

[37] Boon, "Culture and Culpability in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*," 273.

[38] Peele, "Fight Club's Queer Representations," 863. Peele notes that there is no violence directed specifically towards women in the film.

[39] Juhasz, "The Phallus UnFetished," 212.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Kirster Friday would add: it "is not simply that contemporary consumer culture has emasculated men, but rather, the identity crises afflicting the (white) male subject should be read as the result of a postmodern "present" bereft of historical distinctiveness or identity." Friday argues that this predicament leads the Narrator to masochism: "History, as a form of identity, it seems, is always to come. Instead, what remains as *Fight Club's* most consistent condition -- in addition to its relentless masochism -- is the 'perpetual present' described by theorists of postmodern consumer culture." Friday contends that Tyler's appeal to the Narrator is his ability to discover something worth living for -- first Fight Club, and then Project Mayhem -- and in such a way he discovers a way to escape the eternal present and the postmodern condition. Friday, "A Generation of Men Without History," http://0muse.jhu.edu.oasis.oregonstate .edu/journals/postmodern _culture/v013/ 13.3friday.html.

[42] Peele, "Fight Club's Queer Representations," 867.

[43] Friday, "A Generation of Men Without History," http://0muse.jhu.edu.oasis. oregonstate.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v013/13.3friday.html.

[44] Doogan, "Todd Doogan Interviews David Fincher." http://www.thedigitalbits. com /articles/fightclub/fincherinterview.html.

[45] Zizek, "The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link," 120.

[46] Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 10.

[47] Sharrett, "End of Story," 321.

[48] Sharrett, "End of Story," 321-2.

[49] Suzanne Clark, "Fight Club," 416. Clark goes on to describe how the clear portrayal of gender differences in the film enables an audience to understand the experience of male-gendered consumerism. Clark prefers *Fight Club's* clear representation of gender issues over "invisible" representations of gender as portrayed in Modernist artwork. She argues that during Modernism: "a focus on aesthetics rather than on cultural history and politics lead to a certain amnesia about the struggle over gender" (415).

[50] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 73.

[51] Jameson, "Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/JAMESON/jameson.html.

[52] Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 70.

[53] Sharrett, "End of Story," 319.

[54] Stam, *Film Theory*, 307.

[55] Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 50.

[56] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 212.

Annotated Bibliography

Boon, Kevin Alexander. "Culture and Culpability in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*."
     Journal of Men's Studies: A Scholarly Journal about Men and Masculinities 11
     (Spring 2003): 267-276.

> Alexander Boon's article discusses how Chuck Palahniuk's 1997 novel *Fight
> Club* represents white men as powerless in the late 1990's American culture.
> Boon argues that these men are powerless because they have been asked to both
> change and retain their male heritage; for example, they must remain physically
> powerful yet eschew violent behavior. The heroic must become servants. Boon
> contends that the Narrator in the novel struggles to be rescued from his
> fatherless, feminized self.

Campbell, Colin. "Capitalism, Consumption and the Problem of Motives." In
     Consumption and Identity edited by Jonathan Friedman, 23-46. Chur,
     Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994.

> Colin Campbell's article, "Capitalism, Consumption, and the Problems of
> Motives," claims, in this theoretical study of motives, that the critical study of
> the means of consumption provides insights into a culture's belief systems,
> values, and attitudes. Campbell studies lifestyle patterns -- patterns that people
> choose in order to give their lives meaning -- by questioning where the energy
> for their motives comes from, and how this energy is directed.

Clark, J. Michael. "Faludi, *Fight Club*, and Phallic Masculinity: Exploring the
     Emasculating Economics of Patriarchy." *Journal of Men's Studies* 11 (Fall
     2002): 65-76.

> This article presents an argument against patriarchal economics and
> consumerism and calls for an abandonment -- rather than battle -- with
> consumerism. Michael J. Clark's contention aligns with my own theory that the
> conclusion of *Fight Club* ends with an abandonment of consumer culture. Clark
> urges men to reconstruct identities other than that of the consumer.

Clark, Suzanne. "*Fight Club*: Historicizing the Rhetoric of Masculinity, Violence, and
     Sentimentality." *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory* 21 (Spring 2001): 411-
     420.

> Suzanne Clark argues that gendering men in art, evident specifically in *Fight
> Club*, makes critical analysis possible. This contrasts with a kind of amnesia
> oftentimes found in modern artwork that makes gender definitions transparent.

Fight Club's masculinity and violence makes it "critique-able." Clark claims that viewers of the film enter into a discussion and must consider the relationship between male violence and female sentimentality displayed on the screen.

Doogan, Todd. "Todd Doogan Interviews David Fincher." The Digital Bits. http://www.thedigitalbits.com/articles/fightclub/fincherinterview.html

    Todd Doogan of *The Digital Bits*, an online DVD review guide, interviews David Fincher in this entertaining and revealing article. Doogan asks Fincher about Fincher's discovery of the novel *Fight Club*, the film's representation of violence, and whether or not the film is irresponsible, among other questions. Fincher's responses, although sometimes rambling, reveal a sharp wit and a passion for his involvement in the film.

Ebert, Roger. "*Fight Club*." Roger Ebert, Sun Times. http://rogerebert.suntimes.com /apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19991015/REVIEWS/910150302/1023.

    In his review of *Fight Club*, Ebert criticizes the film's celebration of violence and charges that the film is fascist. Rather than offering an alternative to the drudgery of the modern business lifestyle, Ebert claims that the film encourages an audience to participate in a fight rather than participate in philosophical discussion. He rates the film a 2 out of 5.

Edbaurer, Jenny. "Big Time Sensuality: Affective Literacies and Texts That Matter." *Composition Forum* 13 (Winter/Spring 2002): 23-37.

    Jenny Edbaurer's article, "Big Time Sensuality," is an echo of Geoffrey Sirc's article, below. Edbaurer believes that sensual pleasure legitimates the appreciation of art, and should be considered as an important factor when artwork is evaluated. Edbaurer makes this claim in order to offer a contrast to Giroux's method of evaluating art based on its pedagogical value alone.

French, Karl, ed. *Screen Violence*. Edinburgh: Bloomsbury, 1996.

    This collection of 22 essays highlights audience responses to film violence. In one article John Grisham condemns Oliver Stone for the representation of violence in *Natural Born Killers*. In the following essay Oliver Stone offers his rebuttal. While multiple sides of the debate are represented in these and other articles, the reader reaches the conclusion by the end of the essay collection that film violence does not lead to actual violence, rather, an audience inclined to perform violent acts would commit violence regardless.

Friday, Kirster. "'A Generation of Men Without History': *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom." *Postmodern Culture: An Electronic Journal of Interdisciplinary Criticism* 13, no. 3 (May 2004), http://0-muse.jhu.edu.oasis. oregonstate.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v013/13.3friday.html.

> Kirster Friday's fascinating article on *Fight Club* is placed in the context of Jameson's Postmodern theory and concentrates on the Narrator's belief that he is "bereft of historical distinctiveness or identity." Friday first describes how a masochist expects future pleasure, and because of this the masochist is willing to suffer in the present. She then applies this description of the masochist to the Narrator, a man willing to endure pain in the present so that future generations do not have to suffer within the capitalist system.

Friedman, Jonathan. "Introduction." In *Consumption and Identity*. Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1994.

> Jonathan Friedman's "Introduction" to *Consumption and Identity*, a collection of essays by anthropologists on the affects of consumer culture, claims that consumption is a "function of a larger economic process rather than an autonomous social phenomenon." Friedman employs an anthropological approach and uses qualitative data to study difference between consumption as necessity and utility in order to understand how the relationship between cultural strategies and self-constitution aids motives of consumption.

Foucault, Michel. "Preface." In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, xi- xiv. New York: The Viking Penguin, Inc., 1977.

> Foucault's "Preface" to Deleuze and Guattari's text is a pithy treaty against fascism. While I was attracted to *Anti-Oedipus* because it was referred to in many of the academic responses to *Fight Club*, I found in Foucault's "Preface" a refreshing stance antithetical to the unitary, totalizing, and hierarchization of power evident in the age of late capitalism.

Giroux, Henry A. "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: *Fight Club*, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence." *JAC* 21 (Winter 2001): 1-31.

> Giroux explains why *Fight Club* affirms the ideology of the dominant order with its fascination with fascism, misogyny, and glorification of violence in his article, "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders." Giroux is particularly disturbed that many reviewers praised the film for its aesthetics while ignoring the film's irresponsible pedagogy. Giroux asserts that the film's critique on consumerism is an association of consumerism with feminization, and that all

things feminine in the film are despised. The article encourages progressives to heighten their critical literacy in order to accurately decry Hollywood and the cultural hegemony's methods of reification.

Henkel, Guido. "DVD Review – David Fincher." DVD Review. http://www.dvdreview.com/html/dvd_review_-_david_fincher.shtml.

Guido Henkel, a writer for or *DVD Review*, interviews David Fincher at the release of the *Fight Club* DVD. In the interview, Fincher emphasizes that the film depicts the Narrator's road to maturity.

Hoberman, J. "City Limits." The Village Voice. http://www.villagevoice.com /issues/9942/hoberman.php.

Hoberman's critique of *Fight Club* discovers a balance between a condemnation (see Ebert) and praise (see Maslin) of the film. Hoberman's most interesting observation is the way the film's most hard edged scenes contain metaphysical implications. For example, the Narrator and Tyler make soap out of liposuction fat, demonstrating that waste in American society can be made useful again, or more loosely: what comes around goes around.

Höss, Tilman. "Machismo als Gesellschaftskritik: *American Beauty, Fight Club*, The Sea-Wolf." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik: A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture* 49 (Summer 2001): 350-60.

This article, written in German, analyzes both *American Beauty* and *Fight Club*. Höss argues that the masculine eye perceives present society as corrupt because it places the status of the male as the measure-stick for society. Höss claims that the emasculation of men, which took place historically with the division of labor between the sexes in the 19th century, and changed characteristics of work in the 20th century, reduced the status of the male in modern society. He concludes that masculinist criticism of modern society should be taken seriously, but he urges for a "historical critique and modernization of the ideals of masculinity on which this criticism is based."

Jacobs, Meg. "The Politics of Plenty: Consumerism in the Twentieth-Century United States," in *The Politics of Consumption,* ed. Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton, 223-240. Berg: Oxford, 2001.

Meg Jacobs, in her article "The Politics of Plenty: Consumerism in the Twentieth-Century United States," defines consumer politics as "political activism rooted in and predicated on consumer goods." She argues that

economic abundance does not deaden political activism and the depoliticization of the public. Jacobs traces the relationship of consumer culture and political development through 21st century United States history in order to prove that consumerism mobilized the American public, especially during the New Deal, but that consumer politics has been on the decline since WWII due to the rise of conservative economics and the privatization of consumption.

Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991.

There has been a huge response to Frederic Jameson's *Postmodernism* since its publication in 1991. In sum, Jameson's dense text confirms the connection between American culture's artwork and American economic practices. He uses this basis to conclude that the age of global capitalism corresponds to the movement of Postmodernism in artwork, just as monopoly capitalism corresponded to the artwork of Modernism. Jameson writes from a distinctly Marxist perspective to his audience within academia.

---. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." American Studies at the University of Virginia. http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/JAMESON/jameson.html.

"The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" is a brief summary of Frederic Jameson's lengthy text, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.*

Juhasz, Alexandra. "The Phallus UnFetished: The End of Masculinity As We Know It in Late-1990s 'Feminist' Cinema," in *The End of Cinema as We Know It,* edited by Jon Lewis, 210-221. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

Alexandra Juhasz writes, in "The Phallus UnFetished: The End of Masculinity As We Know It," that *Fight Club* and *SouthPark* were her two favorite feminist films in 1999. Juhasz discusses the ways these films are feminist because they question typical representations of masculinity. For example, in *Fight Club* the Narrator "is so uncertain about his masculinity that he opts for schizophrenia to refashion himself as a male through the hypermasculine Tyler Durden."

King, Geoff. *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Geoff King defines "New Hollywood Cinema" in this text by analyzing film genre, the film industry, and socio-historical factors. He begins his work with a reinspection of the Hollywood Renaissance in order to compare and contrast

that movement with the blockbuster films of today. By using case studies of films from both eras, King describes the relationship between the world Hollywood represents and the social, political, and ideological implications of those representations.

Lewis, Jon. "The End of Cinema As We Know It and I Feel …: An Introduction to a Book on Nineties American Film." In *The End of Cinema as We Know It*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

> Jon Lewis's "Introduction" to *The End of Cinema As We Know It* observes the ways materialist factors such as business mergers, technological advances, and profit motives affected American film in the 1990s. Lewis then highlights the key ideas found in the ensuing collection of essays on 90s film. He concludes by questioning whether cinema is really coming to an end, or if the medium will transition to a new kind of cinema in the 21st century.

Maslin, Janet. "*Fight Club*: Such a Very Long Way From Duvets to Danger." New York Times.com. http://www.nytimes.com/library/film/101599fight-film-review.html.

> Janet Maslin, in "*Fight Club*: Such a Very Long Way From Duvets to Danger," presents the film as "visionary" and "disturbing." The film is visionary because of Fincher's style and the narrative ambiguity; it is disturbing when gruesome, nihilistic, and dehumanized. Maslin recommends the film because it explores the lure of violence in American culture.

McFarlane, Brian. "Introduction." *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Calarendon Press, Oxford: 1996.

> Brian McFarlane's "Introduction" to *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, describes such common discussions as adaptation fidelity, in which a film is analyzed by the degree to which it matches original text into cinematic sign system. McFarlane then introduces a new agenda to the discussion: he challenges adaptation theory to consider adaptation as a transference of codes, such as the linear into the spatial. McFarlane's "Introduction" is followed by a series of case studies, including the adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter*.

Naremore, James. "Introduction: Film and the Reign of Adaptation." In *Film Adaptation*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

James Naremore, in his article "Introduction: Film and the Reign of Adaptation," discusses how film adaptation has often been used to teach celebrated literature. This methodology affirmed a series of binaries that privilege the written text over film, high culture over mass culture, and the like. Instead, Naremore hopes that future discussions of film adaptation will take into account other issues such as the "commercial apparatus, the audience, and the academic culture industry."

Nayman, Ira. "The Man Who Wasn't There: Narrative Ambiguity in 3 Recent Hollywood Films." *Creative Screenwriting* 8 (March-April 2001): 57-60.

According to Ira Nayman, three 1990's movies tried to make the unbelievable believable -- *Fight Club*, *Usual Suspects*, and *The Sixth Sense*. To accomplish this, ambiguity, surprise endings, and unreliable narrator tricks were employed. To succeed, these films must work on two levels -- the surface narrative, and the second level, in which the first level must be interpreted by the new information "supplied late in the narrative." Individual scenes must contain ambiguity to encompass both spaces. This form of storytelling is daring, not common in mainstream films, and "embraces the uncertainties of the world."

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York: Owl, 1997.

Chuck Paluhniuk's first novel, written in the first person, tells the story of a car insurance employee who finds escape from his corporate lifestyle when he meets Tyler Durden, a soap salesman. David Fincher translated the novel into film in 1999.

Peele, Thomas. "*Fight Club*'s Queer Representations." *JAC* 21 (Fall 2001): 862-69.

Thomas Peele reveals in this article that the production of normalized gender is interrupted in *Fight Club*. He suggest that *Fight Club* outlines the "possibilities for an eroticized pleasurable queer space where men don't have testicles and where women have penises." Peele notes that this is an interesting element to a film that values hegemonic masculinity and eliminates the homoerotic element at the end. He concludes that, over time, such representations of gender cumulatively challenge predetermined gender identities.

Pettus, Mark. "Terminal Simulation: 'Revolution' in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 6 (Fall 2000): 111-27.

Mark Pettus primary motive in this discussion of the novel *Fight Club* is to locate the linguistic turns of the novel -- specifically, how the Narrator's

language evolves after each of the Narrator's lifestyle changes. Pettus notes that the role of fighting in the novel is to "reorientate the victim," giving each man a power he does not possess as an employee in a corporate system.

Polan, Dana. *Pulp Fiction*. London: British Film Institute, 2000.

Dana Polan's nuanced reading of *Pulp Fiction* places the style and technique of Quentin Tarantino's film on center stage. Although the film's narrative is complex, Polan suggests that it is Taratino's style, rather than the substance of the film, that made the *Pulp Fiction* a cultural event. Polan writes that the audience is drawn into the film as if they are in on a "cool joke" with the protagonists. In my research I have discovered that many fans of *Fight Club* have responded similarly -- they understand who the Narrator and Tyler Durden are, and this special knowledge allows them to interact with the film on a personal level.

Remlinger, Stefanie. "*Fight Club*: The Most Dangerous Movie Ever?" in *The Aesthetics and Pragmatics of Violence*, edited by Michael Hensen and Annette Pankratz, 141-53. Passau, Germany: Stutz, 2001.

Stefanie Remlinger's essay "*Fight Club*: The Most Dangerous Movie Ever?" offers a primary scholarly support for my thesis. She writes: "consumer culture and the fight club are two sides of the same coin." She cites how the violence of the film is presented as an anti-thesis to consumer culture, and that in the end the Narrator rejects violence.

Sharrett, Christopher. "End of Story: The Collapse of Myth in Postmodern Narrative Film," in *The End of Cinema as We Know It*, edited by Jon Lewis, 319-31. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

Christopher Sharrett, in his article "End of Story: The Collapse of Myth in Postmodern Narrative Film," claims that commercial entertainment fails to offer a historical materialist view of reality, instead, entertainment revives outdated and unbelievable myths of the past in order to console audiences -- and make a profit. Sharrett defends his position by examining films, such as *Fight Club*, that represent the fragmented culture of late capitalism without offering a critical exposition of it.

Simons, Herbert W. "Requirements, Problems, and Strategies: A Theory of Persuasion for Social Movements," in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, edited by John Louis, Celeste Michelle Condit, and Sally Caudill, 385- 395. New York: The Guilford Press, 1999.

Herbert W. Simons article, "Requirements, Problems, and Strategies," describes the rhetorical requirement that the leader of a social movement must possess in order to mobilize collective action. Simon's defines rhetorical requirements, the purpose of social movements, and rhetorical strategies that have proved effective in the course of history. While this article does not discuss film directly, the rhetorical strategies Tyler Durden employs in *Fight Club* are startlingly similar.

Sinyard, Neil. *Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. See esp. 1-99.

> *In Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation*, Neil Sinyard claims that the great screen adaptations go for the spirit rather than the letter of the original text. This complicates the stereotypical view that screen adaptation undermines the original text or that adapting the text into film is an act of literary criticism.

Sirc, Geoffrey. "The Difficult Politics of the Popular." *JAC* 21 (Spring 2001): 421-33.

> Geoffrey Sirc, a writing instructor at the University of Minnesota, does not blame his students for liking and writing about *Fight Club*, even though he does not entirely agree with the film's narrow views. He thinks that confrontory art, including rap music with explicit lyrics, challenges his students to become better thinkers and writers.

Stam, Robert. *Film Theory: An Introduction*. New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2000.

> Robert Stam's *Film Theory: An Introduction* is an excellent inquiry into the antecedents of film theory. It traces the relationship between the most famous movements in cinema, including the Soviet Montage-Theorists, the study of Film Language, Auteur Theory, and Postmodernism, while offering a critical reflection on aesthetics, genre, and realism.

Thompson, Stacy. "Punk Cinema." *Cinema Journal* 43 (Winter 2004): 47-66.

> Stacy Thompson first defines the punk cinema aesthetic as one without ties to corporate money, "writerly" rather than "readerly," DIY (do it yourself), and in short "retaining the notion of a history that can be participated in." He claims that *Fight Club* "espouses a nominally anticommercial ideology," but that ultimately the consumers (audience) of the film are moved to further consumption -- rather than moved to act against capitalism and materialism.

Tudor, Andrew. "From Paranoia to Postmodernism? The Horror Movie in Later
    Modern Society," in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, edited by Steve
    Neale, 105-16. London: BFI Publishing, 2002.

Andrew Tudor, noted film writer on the horror genre, considers the appellation
"postmodern horror film" in this article. Tudor's agrees that postmodern horror
film contains elements of "aesthetic reflexivity" and other typical attributes of
the postmodern aesthetic, but Tudor prefers the term "paranoid horror" because
he claims that it describes a reaction to modernist economics, rather than a
progression beyond modernist economics -- which the term "post" implies.

Ward, Alan. "Setting the Scene: Changing Conceptions of Consumption," in *The
    Changing Consumer: Markets and Meanings*, edited by Steven Miles, Alison
    Anderson, and Kevin Meethan, 10-24. Routledge: London: 2002.

Alan Ward, in his article, "Setting the Scene: Changing Conceptions of
Consumption," is troubled by recent scholarship which holds that consumption
fosters meaningful work, promotes an aesthetic attitude, and supports
meaningful social practices. Ward invalidates these perspectives on
consumption by proving that they limit the capacity for social critique and
critical evaluation.

Weiner, Eric. "Making the Pedagogical (Re)Turn: Henry Giroux's Insurgent Cultural
    Pedagogy." *JAC* 21 (Spring 2001): 434-51.

In this article, Eric Weirner summarizes Giroux's pedagogical approach. This
essay includes Weiner's succinct account of Giroux's analysis of *Fight Club* in
the "Notes" section.

Witkin, Robert W. *Adorno on Popular Culture*. London: Routledge Press, 2003. See
    esp. chap. 2, "The theory of pseudo-culture," and chap. 9, "Film and
    Television."

Robert Witkin, in his book *Adorno on Popular Culture*, summarizes and
critiques Adorno's critical analysis of class, radio, and cinema in the 20th
century. Witkin's opening chapter, "Cultural Nemesis," outlines Adorno's
perspective on alienation, fetish-consciousness, and late Romantic art. This
chapter emphasizes, and accurately describes, the alienation of the modern
business person, positioned as he or she is in a market that maximizes
predictability and repeatability.

Zipfel, Pam. "*Fight Club*: Male Identity in the Culture of the City." in *The Image of the City in Literature, Media, and Society*, edited by Will Wright and Steven Kaplan, 3-6. Pueblo, CO: University of Southern Colorado, 2003.

Pam Zipfel deftly sees through what I would consider misreadings of the movie in her article, "*Fight Club*: Male Identity in the Culture of the City." Zipfel describes Tyler as the antithesis to the Narrator, providing the Narrator with an alternative way to evaluate his life. However, Zipfel asserts that Tyler's methods are simply unhelpful and ultimately destructive. Zipfel's comprehensive "Works Cited" is highly recommended reading for anyone researching the film.

Zizek, Slavoj. "The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link," in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, edited by Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis Foster, and Slavoj Zizek, 112-125. Durham, England: Duke UP, 2003.

In "The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link," Zizek believes that the Narrator shatters the "very kernel" of his identity when he fighting himself/ Tyler Durden. Thus, at the conclusion of the film, when the Narrator kills Tyler -- and no longer has to fight against himself -- he is finally able to concentrate his energy against "the true enemy (the system)."

---. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! : Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates.* London: Verso, 2002.

Zizek's *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* explores the response to 9/11 from both the right and the left. His critique of the left is particularly challenging: rather than *resist* the system, and fall back on conclusions such as, "this is a convoluted situation with multiple points of view," liberals should make concrete choices and take a stand in order to direct collective action in the right direction. Such pro-action would break society free from the binary choices continually presented to us by our culture's ideology, such as "choose democracy or fundamentalism" -- as if these are the only two choices. Zizek mentions *Fight Club* particularly in this text, for the protagonist in the film escapes the binary options presented to him.