

【연구논문】

Body, Gender, and Power: Reading the Illusion of a Subversive Potential in *Fight Club*

Seonghoon Kim

(Seoul National University)

1. Introduction

The Interpellation of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), the Althusserian concept, are not restricted to prominent institutions such as church, school, or the military. Contemporary late-capitalist society often hears of various other sectors that are targeted by ISAs and sees their panoptic power. Subjectivity, in turn, is constructed by means of various actions and conglomerations of countless institutions as social space “tends to lose its delimitation” (Diken and Laustsen 75). An individual can adopt a lifestyle with no fixed identity—an identity existing “outside the institutions but even more intensely ruled by their disciplinary logics” (Hardt and Negri 331). Capitalism today is characterized not by “panoptic, place-bounded discipline” forcing people to accept a certain position on any given subject, but by “a permanent movement in which the subject is always in a state of becoming” (Albertson and Diken 246). In short, power can mutate,

and subjectivity can become transformative.

American cinema has shown a persistent interest in dramatizing the ways in which the power dynamics between a society and individuals are formed, thereby proposing an allegory of modern American society. *Modern Times* (Charlie Chaplin, 1936), which represents individuals functioning like gears in a whole system, quickly comes to mind. The post-World War II Hollywood cinema, in particular, has highlighted ways in which “conventional” power has mutated in terms of changing social milieux in different contexts. From movies such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Miloš Forman, 1975) to *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1999), in particular, power is represented as transformative, mobile, and pervasive throughout contemporary society.¹⁾

Nowhere is such a tendency more visible than in *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), a much-discussed, controversial film based on Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 novel of the same title. The psychological thriller features individuals’ submission into and rebellion against the transformed

1) The 1975 movie vividly represents how R. P. McMurphy (Jack Nicholson), the anti-heroic protagonist, clashes with and rebels against the panoptic authority represented by Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) in a mental hospital. In Forman’s movie, though on a smaller scale compared to the Foucauldian concept of Panopticon, the surveillance and panoptic power Nurse Ratched wields in a small ward serves as a good allegory for the power relationship between individuals and an oppressive society. In *The Truman Show*, another film that seriously explores the theme of panopticism, the relationship between the subject interpellated and the society that interpellates it is represented as the producer of a TV show and a star in the show. In the movie, Truman, an ordinary insurance salesman, has lived 30 years only to find that his life is entirely fabricated by a reality TV show, *The Truman Show*, and that he is merely a TV star on a set, an enormously huge, dome-shaped structure somewhere near Hollywood, which is rigged with thousands of carefully concealed cameras and microphones and which is controlled by the creator of the show, Christof.

interpellative power in the late-capitalist society. Fincher's film, in a broad sense, is a cultural representation of the crisis of "everyman" living in the society. Within the cinematic representation, society is a space where credit card companies, designer brands, and the stock market constantly coax an individual into consumerism or the acquisition of material possessions, thereby forming a new type of hierarchy that dominates the subject's life and spirit. Significantly, everything in this sort of society is reduced to the troubled relation between "the haves" and "have-nots"; the power unquestionably belongs to those who are able to control the flow of finance, and those who do not constantly aspire to have the power while trapped in the already-established economic inequality. "Have-nots," even including the middle class, in this situation strive to form a *raison d'être* in their lives by consuming the merchandise that they believe belongs to "the haves." Though cinematic, such a representation, not far from reality, carries a portion of truth, especially regarding the popular slogan "We are 99 percent," which was chanted in the recent anti-consumerist social movement in 2011 called Occupy Wall Street.

On the other hand, *Fight Club*, with a critique of capitalism and gender issues convolutedly entangled, alludes to the anxiety of white American men, an anxiety that eventually leads to engaging in an exaggerated form of masculinity. In the film's combination of linear and non-linear narrative, the issues center on the representation of a male *doppelgänger*, as the film problematizes late-capitalist society and shows how men become subjected to and split by extreme materialism.²⁾ As Gary Crowds indicates, the underground Fight Club in the movie serves as a "pungent satire" of "the soul-deadening

consequences of excessive materialism” and of “the emotional legacy for a generation of young men of physically or emotionally absent fathers” (47).

Fight Club's critique of late-capitalist society, however, is rather one-sided because the film presents this perspective only through male characters that equate the intrusion of capitalist attitudes in society with femininity. This vexing gender issue is clearly depicted as one of the crucial leitmotifs in *Fight Club*. Based on this assumption, this paper examines how Fincher's film places the male characters in an ambivalent ambience, and although they consider themselves victims of a feminized society, it is the male characters that ultimately victimize themselves through the myth of excessive masculinity.

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- 2) The whole plot of the movie becomes rather simple when focused on the revelation of the doppelgänger that serves as peripety. An anonymous narrator (Edward Norton), who can be generally referred to as “Jack,” lives in an unnamed American city, working as an automobile recall specialist. One day, on a flight home from a business trip, the narrator meets a mysterious soap seller named Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt). After finding that his condominium has been exploded, the narrator moves into Tyler's crumbling mansion. Then they come to engage in a fistfight in front of a bar at night, which leads them to develop an underground club for men called Fight Club. Later, toward the end of the movie, the narrator tries to stop the violence and terrorism of Project Mayhem, which grew out of Fight Club, and during the process, he discovers that Tyler and he are one and the same person and that Tyler is merely a projection of his own mind.

2. “You Do Not Talk About Fight Club”: The Paradox of the Underground Club as an Anarchic and Rhizomatic Society

Indeed, *Fight Club* offers some serious comments on late-capitalist and consumerist society, criticizing its negative effects on individuals in a very straightforward way.³⁾ Through the representation of Jack, in particular, a pathologically dark side of society is underscored. The movie depicts Jack as suffering from insomnia, a symptom caused by extremely competitive and oppressive circumstances, and its early part focuses on showing how he is weakened by and subjected to a hierarchical power in a corporation. Although resorting to consumption of the state-of-the-art commodities to overcome the stressful position, he finds himself unable to stabilize himself. As a fanatic devotee of IKEA, the Swedish multinational home furnishing corporation, Jack is addicted to purchasing its brand-new items, as depicted in a scene in which he imagines the items from the IKEA catalogue filling his condominium. At the same time, disgusted with work and his own endless consumption, the narrator questions sardonically but ontologically, “What kitchen set defines me as a person?”

Most lines uttered by Jack serve to present the audience with a critical view of the reality of consumerist society. Thinking of insomnia, for instance, Jack post-structurally narrates, “With insomnia, nothing’s real. Everything is far away. Everything is a copy of a copy.” Here,

3) Palahniuk himself, the writer of the novel *Fight Club*, emphasizes its function as a social critique, discussing violence. He said in a CNN interview; “The system is more frightened of our anti-consumerist message than they are of our violence. The violence is just an excuse to trash us” (Diken and Laustsen 70).

he is represented as a typical individual living in this post-modern society, living on the boundary between reality and unreality, experiencing, in Baudrillardian terms, “simulacra and simulations” that blur or threaten the difference between “true” and “false,” and between “real” and “imaginary” (3). For Jack, as he narrates through voice-over in the film, living on the boundary is “like living in the IBM Stellar Sphere, the Philip Morris Galaxy, Planet Starbucks.” The figurative words “sphere,” “galaxy,” and “planet” indicate how Jack recognizes consumerism in modern society by territorializing it based on popular brands. Jack’s analogy here informs economic, social spaces where his subjectivity continues to be confined and defined.

Jack is then an individual, which is, to borrow Althusser’s words, “always-already a subject” (700) interpellated by late-capitalist society. He is trapped in the imaginary ideology of this society, and the relationship between society and individuals reifies the power dynamics. Jack, in Althusserian terms, is also “a subjected being who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission” (701). “What is represented in ideology,” Althusser writes, “is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live” (695). A direct and bitter critique of consumerist society by Tyler Durden supports this notion. In a scene where members of Fight Club come together, he argues how films and television in society promote a false idea: “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." Tyler's rhetorical use of the first person plural, "we," clearly excludes women, which actually situates the men in a feminized position. So it is rather logical that in order to regain autonomy and vitality, Jack, absolutely languishing under the control of society, willingly accepts the self-discipline that Tyler and his Fight Club demand. This discipline, however, indicates another type of submission, as is revealed later in the movie.

Fight Club unwittingly accentuates this paradox, though the movie carefully presents an articulated critique of late-capitalist society. If capitalism survives by sublimating commodities, transforming them into objects of desire, the film is obsessed with the desire to escape from the lure of the commodity form. Indeed, the film does everything to disavow capitalism: the destruction of Jack's perfectly equipped condominium, his moving into Tyler's dilapidated mansion right beside a landfill, terrorizing the food industry, blowing up the financial buildings to cripple the credit-card-driven society, and so on. The ultimate aim of all these actions is the destruction of capitalism within which modern people like Jack are confined and the desire with which they are preoccupied. Fincher's movie adopts as a strategy "searching for a nonconsumerist domain outside capitalist exchange, heading toward a total anti-production, a potlatch" (Diken and Laustsen 71).

The characteristics of a potlatch that is against a state, much like an anarchist organization, enable *Fight Club* to be seen as a rhizome-like unit. A rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, "ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social

struggles” (8). Deleuze and Guattari go on to indicate that although it “may be broken, shattered at a given spot,” a rhizome “will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (10). Like an organism that invades the terrain of capitalism in a discursive way, *Fight Club* is uncontrollable and unexpected, seemingly performing “deterritorialization.” The secret organization grows to undermine the power of mainstream capitalist society as a rhizome does under the ground, into the bigger military-like organization Project Mayhem, in a process underscored by the *mise-en-scène* of the whole movie with very dark, low-key lighting. Also, by representing the anarchic cells of Project Mayhem multiplying rapidly and spreading across the United States, Fincher’s movie suggests that millions of potential members work at boring, emasculating, unethical corporate jobs.

Despite its potential uncontrollability, however, *Fight Club*’s final transformation into Project Mayhem, an extremist anarchic organization, becomes problematic in the light of the danger that such a “rhizome” may cause. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that “you will reencounter organizations that restratify everything, formations that restore power to a signifier, attributions that reconstitute a subject—anything you like, from Oedipal resurgences to fascist concretions” (10). It is at this point that *Fight Club* obviously questions the materialism of society. The film, nonetheless, places the male characters in an ambivalent and contradictory situation by problematizing concepts such as patriarchal power, gender dichotomy, and masculinity, revealing a dilemma within which they are entrapped.

While resisting a capitalist society that presumably emasculates him, Jack finds it impossible to accomplish the rebellion without

violence, self-discipline, and totalitarian domination. The protagonist is confronted with the irony that he must either represent this hierarchical power or be subjected to another. The representation of the quasi-anarchistic Fight Club and Project Mayhem, then, backfires, as it informs the peril of totalitarianism or fascism of (or within) the (white) male-only organizations. Barker asserts that “*Fight Club* has the appearance of a liberal agenda, advocating a revolutionary fervor branded as rebellion against oppressive fascistic forces, but which actually masks an ideology similar to early forms of fascism” (179). There is no need for individuals in both Fight Club and Project Mayhem, especially when the latter is characterized by military men dressed alike with black shirts and shaven heads, intending to commit militaristic sabotage. Ironically, the organizations embody another “copy of a copy,” as Jack bitterly mentions earlier in the movie regarding capitalism; by creating the illusion of freedom, they share the same traits—interpellative power and forced submission—with the capitalism that they attempt to escape from.

Fight Club shows that Jack’s insomnia comes from spiritual ennui and disappointment with his “tiny life” filled with material goods that signify nothing, but, at the same time, always interpellate and command him to *buy* something. He thus becomes addicted to submission, first finding the freedom of “losing all hope” with self-help groups and then replacing this with the freedom of losing all control with Tyler, his alter ego. Jack destroys his past and identity upon Tyler’s appearance and submits completely to the meaning Tyler creates, as he makes Zen-Buddhist-like statements such as, “It’s only after we’ve lost everything that we’re free to do anything” and

“[T]he things that you own end up owning you.” Though Zen-Buddhist, Jack’s experience, as “not only of submission, but the feeling of freedom through submission is a process required of fascism’s political agenda” (Barker 180). Likewise, Tyler’s command sounds much more autocratic than anarchic when he addresses men of Fight Club: “The first rule of Fight Club is you do not talk about Fight Club. The second rule of Fight Club is you-do-not-talk-about-Fight-Club!” The self-discipline in Fight Club in the form of extreme violence is about losing one’s autonomous voice. As Diken and Laustsen correctly point out, “[I]f Project Mayhem is the ridiculous Nazi-type organization with unreflexive skinheads who just repeat Tyler’s orders, Fight Club is the molecular face of fascism” (64).

Significantly, this totalitarian self-discipline informs a sort of perverted sadomasochistic violence. Perversion, Silverman suggests, “also subverts many of the binary oppositions upon which the social order rests: it crosses the boundary separating pleasure from pain (masochism)” (187). The practice of fistfights at Fight Club is both sadistic and masochistic in the way that the men in the club feel pleasure and freedom by beating and being beaten. In Fight Club, this violence is inflicted directly on their male bodies, and, in turn, they become an object of submission and the audience’s gaze, while the camera often focuses on how they (especially their faces) are crushed and bloody. Silverman offers an insight into the relation between sadomasochistic violence and gaze: “Voyeurism has been heavily coded within Western culture as a male activity, and associated with aggression and sadism” (204). Indeed, the men in Fight Club, as masochists, try to recover their lost pleasure by destroying their bodies, much as masochists

search for punishment to feel pleasure from pain, which enables them to save their male spirit. Jack's voice-over on the fistfights in Fight Club demonstrates the rationale: "When the fight was over, nothing was solved, but nothing mattered. We all felt saved."

3. "We're a Generation of Men Raised by Women": Body and Masculinity

The psychological process of being saved by being beaten defines Jack's submissive position in his relationship with Tyler and in Fight Club. In *Fight Club*, it turns out that Jack is actually split into feminine Jack and hyper-masculine Tyler. The camera draws a clear demarcation between femininity and masculinity by representing the main male characters as utterly antithetic. Jack's feminized body and mentality compared to Tyler's hyper-masculine torso and violent action presents the binary opposition between the two genders. For Jack and Tyler, masculinity is something that can be achieved through a disciplined body through Fight Club and Project Mayhem, an idea that delimitates the masculine body from the feminine body in a misguided way.

Importantly, Tyler's body is also preoccupied with masochistic pleasure when being severely beaten by the owner of the bar (whose basement is Fight Club's location); Tyler, blood-soaked, continues to "laugh" until the owner becomes frightened. Laura Mulvey, in explaining her concept of voyeurism, has proposed that "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split

between active/male and passive/female” (19). Mulvey goes on to suggest how the fe/male gaze can be fixed on male bodies:

The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its *narcissistic aspect*. The conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form. Scale, space, stories are all anthropomorphic. Here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: *the human face, the human body* (17, emphasis added)

In *Fight Club*, the bodies of both Jack and Tyler are positioned as the subject of the fe/male gaze. The movie “could be considered as a moving away from placing women as bodily spectacles, and encouraging men to ‘look’ at themselves more in this light” (Ruddell 496), as the voyeurism of male bodies pervades *Fight Club*.

The character of Robert ‘Bob’ Paulsen, who represents all men feminized and victimized by late-capitalism, is exemplary of the “bodily spectacle” with which the movie is preoccupied. Bob, once a champion body builder, developed enormous breasts or “bitch tits,” as Jack describes them, after having his cancerous testicles removed. His status, as a physically and psychologically castrated man with womanly breasts, is a product of his failed pursuit of a popular modern masculine ideal, that is, self-discipline through the body.⁴⁾ Bob tries desperately to reassert his lost masculinity by attending “Remaining Men Together” (a support group for men with testicular cancer) and

4) As suggested in the film, excessive competition for an ideal male body led the former body builder to overuse steroids, the result of which was a hormone imbalance and eventually the development of gynecomastia.

joining Fight Club. The case of Bob indicates that “the heterosexual white male, betrayed by corporations and bureaucrats, can only restore his natural superiority via his body, which prevails even though it is pummeled, tortured, and wounded” (Barker 179). Represented in the opening of the film as a passive, unconfident, and indolent man, Jack learns that he must “cry” like a girl in order to sleep and overcome insomnia; he eventually cries in the arms of Robert ‘Bob’ Paulsen (Meat Loaf Aday) who urges, “Go ahead you can cry,” leaving the marks of his feminine tears on Bob’s female-like big “tits.”

Fight Club thus describes the process in which the wounded body is constructed as more “masculine,” more “real,” as opposed to the clean white, upright, suited body of Jack’s boss, a typical representative of late-capitalist society. A masculine body that finds pleasure through pain unites men in Fight Club; bruised eyes, cut lips, and broken noses enable the men to recognize each other, forming a group identity and a sense of belonging when they are outside of the club. However, while “the male body is a site where the meanings, limits and excesses of contemporary masculinity are tested, defined and redefined” (Iocco 47), it is at the cost of splitting into passivity and subsequent loss of autonomy under the totalitarian rules of Fight Club and Project Mayhem. The sadomasochistic contradiction corresponds to Silverman’s idea of the male masochist who “leaves his social identity completely behind—actually abandons his ‘self’—and passes over into the ‘enemy terrain’ of femininity” (190), because of “his unconscious desires from a feminine position” (213).

In order not to return to the rules of capitalism, men must submit themselves to the rules of the organizations. The growth of Project

Mayhem accentuates this ambivalent situation. By the time a member of the Project Mayhem, Robert Paulsen, is killed while destroying a piece of “corporate art,” Project Mayhem has grown into a sort of micro-fascist movement whose members give up their names and follow Tyler’s commands, such as, “The first rule of Project Mayhem is you don’t ask questions about Project Mayhem,” which sounds more repressive than the rules of *Fight Club*, unquestioningly and unthinkingly. Jack discovers members of a branch of Project Mayhem in a city chanting words he said to the original group a few days ago: “He has a name. His name is Robert Paulsen.” In analyzing the characteristic of Project Mayhem, Thompson argues that this scene “prepares the ground for the film’s shift in focus from the social project that has clearly become fascistic to Jack’s concerns as an individual” (60-61). Though convincing, Thompson somewhat ignores men’s (including Jack’s) dilemma that if they are interested in individuality, it would mean that they return to the position being subjected and interpellated by the capitalism from which they try to escape.

Likewise, it is arguable that the equation between the male body and masculinity is constructed on an unstable base. In *Fight Club*, the body issue culminates in Tyler’s marking men in Project Mayhem with a “chemical burn” to the hand because it symbolizes the “reproduction” of an established and intensified masculine body in that totalitarian group. This means that the rules that are persuasive throughout capitalist society in various forms return as a uniform and homogeneous panoptic rule which is integrated into the most oppressive one of all under the name of freedom.

The dilemma becomes evident when it comes to the gender issue. To let *Fight Club* and later *Project Mayhem* dominate their bodies, men must abandon their sense of self by placing themselves in a passive feminine position in which they are abused and become submissive, a ritual for conjuring up an imaginary “masculine” body. *Fight Club*’s critique of late capitalism’s effect on masculinity is thus framed as a strictly homosocial affair, indicating that it is an assumption of main characters in the film that men have been gradually enfeebled by capitalism. *Fight Club* implies that Jack is basically depressed by the *belief* that late-capitalist society reifies feminized masculinity by which he is threatened and trapped. His desire to escape will be continuously frustrated unless his psychosis is split and he experiences schizophrenic symptoms by living with his hyper-masculine doppelgänger, Tyler. Jack creates Tyler as everything that he is not, and in many ways all of Tyler’s attributes are grounded in his masculinity. Tyler can attract women, and he is also a strong and charismatic leader, as he solemnly but mockingly claims in a changeover sequence in which Jack inadvertently comes to realize that he and Tyler are the same person:

All the ways you wish you could be. That’s me. I look like you wanna look. I fuck like you wanna fuck. I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not Little by little, you’re just letting yourself become Tyler Durden!

This peripety reveals that to deny the femininity threatening him in society, Jack has established a male-only society that would reconstruct

patriarchy through hyper-masculine Tyler, his mental projection. This society, in an economic and familial sense, embodies Heidi Hartmann's definition of patriarchy: "[R]elations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (quoted in Sedgwick 3). If so, "in any male-dominated society," Sedgwick suggests, "there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power" (25). That the main characters in *Fight Club* are deeply involved in capitalist production indicates this aspect, Jack as a salary man working for an automobile company, and Tyler as a soap salesman. Much like "patriarchal power," *Fight Club*'s "anarchist" action is fundamentally based on the idea of "lost" masculinity. In the club, male bodies are and should be "made perverse as part of an attempt to reclaim a fantasy of a pure, original, and pre-capitalist masculinity" (Iocco 49).

Through homosocial male bonding, men in *Fight Club* attempt to recover and construct their masculine identity, an imaginary ideology. Jack, trying to construct or rebuild his lost masculinity by creating Tyler, is also entrapped in the imaginary ideology. Based on the equation between the "real" penis (as a genital) and the "symbolic" phallus (a Lacanian concept), as Silverman suggests, this ideology of masculinity registers the anxiety of castration because "conventional masculinity can best be understood as the denial of castration, and hence as a refusal to acknowledge the defining limits of subjectivity" (46). The masculine Tyler in the film well addresses the fear of castration in a graphic, straightforward way: "You know, man, it

could be worse. A woman could cut off your penis while you're sleeping and toss it out the window of a moving car." Thus, it is imperative that belief in the penis/phallus equation be fortified in the way that a man excludes femininity from his psyche, while being convinced of the binary opposition between masculinity and femininity.

Given that Jack and Tyler's masculinity is a fantasy, it can be said that Jack tries to "perform" masculinity. If the male characters are misunderstood, *Fight Club* "encourages the viewer to read the two halves of the character as oppositional binary codes, thus creating problems with the gendered identity of the character" (Ruddell 501). As Judith Butler suggests, "That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core" (136). Jack and Tyler are dependent on an unstable gender fantasy because "genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (Butler 136). The mission of the reconstruction of the restoration of "lost" masculinity in *Fight Club* is based on this dilemma. For Jack, therefore, there is no way to escape this problem because there is no place to go without destroying feminine capitalism.

Just as Tyler, Jack's doppelgänger, is in fact Jack's fantasy, the male characters' fantasy of masculinity in the film is just a fantasy. The following argument by Butler is very reminiscent of Jack's complaint about late-capitalist society; "everything is a copy of a copy":

The notion of gender parody defended here does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original; just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy, the transfiguration is of an Other who is always already a “figure” in the double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. (138, emphasis in original)

Likewise, *Fight Club* represents that there is no original, no distinction between the real and the imaginary. Because Tyler is just a copy of a copy of a “real” Jack, the creation of Tyler “itself” is somewhat a result of this representation serving to present the instability of gender identity and unsettle the assumed male unified self.

In fact, Fincher’s movie is not the first in modern society to imagine white men as victims, and there are many other films dealing with the same issue. American culture since the World War I and II eras has been inclined to depict men as emasculated, as dramatized in several Hollywood films produced in 1940s such as *Pride of the Marines* (1945), *The Lost Weekend* (1945), and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). These films ascribe the anxiety of American masculinity and the crisis of male subjectivity to the cataclysmic events of the 1940s, especially World War II, by which white men were enfeebled both physically and psychologically, and subsequently lost their traditional patriarchal position that had once secured their masculinity. Relating imaginary masculinity to her own term, “dominant fiction,” Silverman offers an insight into the situation and circumstances under which white men have been placed since the war:

The “hero” returns from World War II with a physical or psychic wound which marks him as somehow deficient, and which renders him incapable of functioning smoothly in civilian life. Sometimes the veteran also finds himself strangely superfluous to the society he ostensibly protected during the war; his functions have been assumed by other men, or—much more disturbingly—by women. These texts thus dramatize the vulnerability of conventional masculinity and the largest dominant fiction to what I will call “historical trauma.” (53)

With the development of capitalism, the traditional patriarchal position once occupied by men was replaced by women. Men found that women as matriarchs had managed to run everything in society in their absence, which means their patriarchal power was not stable any longer.⁵⁾

For white males, the war was significant and meaningful in the ways that it metaphorically affirmed their fictional masculinity through phallic cannons, guns, and so on. They also did so through the physical contact and violence between men as in the case of *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem* in *Fight Club*. As Silverman writes, “[T]he fiction of a phallic masculinity generally remains intact only for the duration of the war. As long as the soldier remains on the battlefield, he is fortified to some degree by his comrades; the “binding” which can no longer take place at the level of the ego occurs instead at the level of the group” (63). Thus, once they found that they had lost their masculinity, men became obsessed with the imaginary belief that because women have no penises, this physical difference makes them

5) Silverman particularly suggests that the films like *The Best Years of Our Lives* “identif[y] Hollywood’s male subject with qualities that are more conventionally identified with its female subject, such as passivity and insufficiency” (89).

inferior. Here, the male passivity Silverman indicates is evocative of Jack's position in the late-capitalist society as a feminized man and his resulting relationship to Tyler, who is active and dominant in a sense of imaginary masculinity. For men in the Fight Club, "[V]iolence is necessary in revealing the instability of gender identity," as "Jack is able to take up both masculine and feminine positions, thereby allowing himself to occupy the role of victim while simultaneously retaining his virility" (M. Ta 266).

The idea of masculinity represented in *Fight Club* evokes various "disturbing" movements in 1960s including civil rights, feminist, and gay and lesbian movements, which caused white masculinity to undergo a sort of revisioning, constituting a psychological blow that, as David Savran proposes, made white men gradually imagine themselves "as victims of those advances made by marginalized groups" (4-5). Not surprisingly, Tyler, who announces, "We're a generation of men raised by women," situates members of Fight Club in the history of the last half of twentieth century, articulating the psychological suffering contemporary white men underwent:

"Man, I see in Fight Club the strongest and smartest men who've ever lived. I see all this potential and I see it squandered. God damn it, *an entire generation* pumping gas, waiting tables, *slaves of the white collars* We're the middle *children of history*, man. No purpose or place. We have no *Great War*. No Great Depression. Our great war is a *spiritual war*. Our great depression is our lives" (emphasis added).

Coupled with the idea of "men raised by women," Tyler's frustration about men lacking masculinity legitimizes his claim for "a

spiritual war” engaged to recover a fictional phallus lost by capitalism since the war. Victimized and feminized by his capitalist culture in the film, it is natural for Jack to desperately seek to recover what he perceives to be his lost masculinity by resorting to violent measures, which are “not only symptomatic, but also constitutive, of this condition of dissociated identity” (M. Ta 265).

This disempowered manhood is manifested through Jack and Tyler’s talking about the absence of their fathers:

Jack: I don’t know my dad. I mean, I know him, but he left when I was like six years old. Married this woman, had more kids. He did this like every six years. Goes to a new city and starts a new family.

Tyler: He was setting up franchises.

Interestingly, the undercurrent of the discussion sums up in a way the process of capitalist development—the father figure is like a salesperson, a family like a business, and children like money. The lack of a stable father figure in *Fight Club* works to create homosocial, if not homoerotic, desire and society between the men. Tyler’s rather misogynistic statement affirms this: “I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer we need.” Having lost their fathers to capitalism, Jack and Tyler identify it with something feminine, as *Fight Club* exhibits “an anxiety about masturbatory commercialism by locating the cause of Jack’s seeming loss of masculinity in the proliferation of consumer culture, thereby making participation in *capitalism* *a feminine activity*” (M. Ta 273, emphasis added).

4. Recovering a Normative Heterosexual Society: The Case of Marla Singer and the Ending Sequence

That men in *Fight Club* identify late-capitalist society with something feminine, with a firm belief in a dichotomy between masculinity and femininity, self-disciplining their bodies through Fight Club and Project Mayhem strengthens the idea of heteronormativity or heterosexuality. The relationship between the main male characters and the character of Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter), demonstrates this aspect well, helping to interpret the ending of the film as the return to a normative sexuality. In the film, the way Jack/Tyler and their homosocial bonding deal with capitalism parallels their attitude toward Marla, either complying with or conquering it. Marla, the only major female character in the film, is important in the ways that it is she who at first serves as a threat to the male characters and remains so until the end of the film. The ending is also important because it represents the fact that Jack finally retrieves his masculinity psychologically without Tyler. Thompson correctly indicates, “Although intensely homoerotic collectives of men do not automatically necessitate misogyny, *Fight Club* pairs the two, rendering all the more peculiar the dismissal of homosex in favor of the creation of a heterosexual couple” (59).

Throughout *Fight Club*, homosexual examples are prominent. One of the best examples is the very first scene (which is later revealed as the scene right before the ending scene where financial buildings all collapse because of the bombs of Project Mayhem) in which Tyler stands over Jack, holding a gun that is placed firmly in Jack’s mouth, which can be interpreted as homosexual, with the gun is a

symbol, a surrogate phallus. In effect, the fantasy of masculinity embodied in homosocial bonding among men inevitably contains “homophobic” undercurrents. Following Freud’s notion on homophobia, Sedgwick notes that “the special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structured combination of the two” (25).⁶⁾

The relationship between Jack and Tyler can be thought of as a combination of the homosocial and the homosexual. Sedgwick’s concept of the “homosocial desire” provides a useful way to theorize the practice of revealing and hiding homosexuality. She defines the homosocial as “social bonds between persons of the same sex” and suggests that homosocial practice such as male bonding can be mapped as a desire similar to homosexuality, even when it is “intense homophobia, fear and hatred of heterosexuality (1). Sedgwick also argues that cultural representation often tries to “rupture” this “continuum” between homosocial and homosexual behavior in order to establish the homosocial as distinct from homosexuality in the sense of gender dichotomy (1-2).

For Jack, the character of Marla is both a threat to his homosocial (or homosexual) desire and a subject of heterosexual desire. Marla at one time is represented as a tomboy, and, at other times, as a typical femme fatale—chain-smoking, with short hair and smoky makeup that looks like death, and that stresses her personality as active and

6) Sedgwick goes on to propose that a man who pursues homosociality “considers himself transparent to, and often under the compulsion of, another male such a sense of persecution represents the fearful, phantasmic rejection by recasting of an original homosexual (or even merely homosocial) desire” (91-92).

aggressive, but simultaneously very seductive.⁷⁾ Marla is thus seen as embodying a more powerful seduction of capitalism to Jack because after meeting her in a support group for testicular cancer victims, which he regards as his “vacation,” Jack becomes more troubled than when he had insomnia that was a result of living in a consumerist society; he simply says, “she ruined everything.” More importantly, the female character is represented as a threat to Jack’s relationship with Tyler and thus a threat to his illusion that he and Tyler are separate, different people. As Iocco indicates, “Marla, the female love interest for both Jack and Tyler, both reinforces and challenges tropes about the dangerous, disruptive female love interest” (52). She is sexually voracious, and she steals the meal of a deceased elderly woman, describing herself as “a monster …… infectious human waste.” Tyler also refers to Marla as “a predator posing as a house plant” and warns Jack, “if you say anything about me, or what goes in this house to her or to anybody, we’re done.”

Certainly, Jack’s desire for Marla is his desire for heterosexuality through masculinity. When Jack discovers that Tyler has been sleeping with her, he complains, “She’d invaded my support groups, now she’s invaded my *home*” (emphasis added). The home Jack refers to is actually Jack and Tyler’s place where his homosocial (or homosexual) desire exists. Yet, ironically, it is revealed that Jack himself slept with Marla precisely because Tyler is Jack and vice versa, and it is thus Jack who threatens the homosocial desire for Tyler through the

7) Director David Fincher states in an interview that “Marla wears opalescent makeup so she always has this smack-fiend patina, like a corpse, [b]ecause she is a truly romantic nihilist” (quoted in Iocco 52).

desires for Marla. Jack sexually conquers Marla through intense and vigorous intercourse with her, which makes her totally fascinated by him. Thus, it is fitting that toward the end of *Fight Club*, Marla's role as a threatening woman gradually weakens; she finally returns to participate in the construction of normative heterosexuality, and hence the successful, if not perfect, return of Jack's masculine penis/phallus in the sense of power relationships between men and women. This is in tandem with what Silverman suggests, "[S]adism is also the one which is most compatible with conventional heterosexuality" (187). By situating Marla in the feminine position and through a heterosexual affair with her, Jack, who was once placed in a masochistic position, reclaims his sadistic masculine position.

The ending sequence of *Fight Club* shows how gender dichotomy continues to exist in the psyches of men and the homosocial society that attempts to maintain normative, performative gender. "The performance," Butler suggests, "is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame—an aim that cannot be attributed to a subject, but, rather, must be understood to found and consolidate the subject" (140). In this regard, while Ruddell's argument that Jack "does differentiate himself from his ideal-ego by the end of the film, and indicates that the attack on the ego is over, although it is unclear whether any return to reality or the external world is possible" (501) is convincing, it somewhat ignores how Jack internalized the attribute of his ideal-ego, Tyler. Other critics like M. Ta argue that Jack defines Tyler's world as hyper-masculine and states that his "choice to escape this world is the choice of castration" (270). However, Jack does not choose castration. Rather, he chooses

the unified self by removing the split self, Tyler, in order to reaffirm his stable identity with the phallus, achieving normative heterosexuality. In effect, Jack's choice to shoot himself in the jaw, the most intense violence in the film, indicates the completion of the enactment of the world of Tyler's hyper-masculinity on his body. Jack, once a passive and feminized male in *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem* under the leadership of Tyler, ultimately takes the position of an active and masculine male with the gunshot. His choice does not represent his agency but, ironically, the final stage of his self-destruction/discipline. It all the more emphasizes the equation: Jack is Tyler as long as Jack is trapped in the myth of masculinity.

The fantasy of masculinity is closely relevant to "the economic and ideological functions of the family," to use Althusser's terminology (Silverman 47). Although there are "many other signifying and representational elements" that construct the myth of masculinity, "the family and the phallus constitute the core elements of our dominant fiction" (ibid.). As Barker argues, if Tyler is the character who is confined within the law of the father and symbolic order in terms of the Lacanian concept, "his acts of rebellion, like splicing porno into family films, are adolescent and do not evolve away from a capitalist system Tyler's subversion is a boy's fantasy of comic-book violence and actions without consequence" (183). While Tyler's case indicates an attempt to reaffirm patriarchal power, Jack's case might imply that by controlling his alter-ego or libid.o that is Tyler through his super-ego, he makes himself *the* law of the father as a patriarch-to-be and reclaims his unified/homogeneous self. Thus, once his self is established, he does not need Tyler any longer.

Furthermore, as the ending credits of *Fight Club* appear, an image of the penis flickers on the screen in the same fashion Tyler had spliced it into family films. At this point, normative heterosexuality and phallic power are once again reinforced. While the crumbling of the skyscrapers might imply that corporations and consumerism are femininity to be defeated in the battle of gender, the image of the penis at the very end suggests that the phallus that is normative heterosexual will continue to survive any gender relations. In this way, the end of *Fight Club* suggests the return of all things “normal,” and all Jack needed to do was to take Marla’s hand and say to the bewildered woman, “You’ve helped me at a very strange time in my life.” Hence, Marla had *just* helped Jack return from strange to normal. As Butler writes, a unified gender is “an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (136).

However, toward the ending sequence, *Fight Club* also acknowledges a homosocial/homosexual dilemma and illusion of the myth of masculinity. It is when *Fight Club* grows out of control, evolving into a larger, much more destructive force, Project Mayhem, that Jack finally takes his own action, tracing down the origin and extent of Project Mayhem. When he learns that men in Project Mayhem have planted explosives all around the city, Jack realizes that the action is “insane,” something not normal, and tries to stop it. It is interesting that although Jack shoots himself in the jaw, he mysteriously kills Tyler Durden, not himself. This scene indicates the dilemma that to pursue the myth of masculinity, Jack comes to create a homosocial/homosexual doppelgänger, Tyler, but when it becomes a threat to

him and is out of his control, he must remove it. As Silverman suggests, “male homosexuality is still tied to the heterosexual norm” (347). In short, Jack’s elimination of Tyler parallels his contradictory behavior that although he once felt satisfied in *Fight Club*, he tries to stop Project Mayhem’s destruction of the city. It is precisely because just as Jack and Tyler are the same, so are *Fight Club* and Project Mayhem in sharing the same false idea.

5. Conclusion

The character of Jack/Tyler symbolizes the failure in criticizing late-capitalism in *Fight Club*. The film problematizes their methods of resistance against capitalism that reify the myth of masculinity and the illusion that the destruction of capitalism could guarantee the construction of (lost) masculinity or vice-versa. Their resort to *Fight Club* inevitably results in not only totalitarian violence but also gender trouble. Diken and Laustsen brilliantly summarize this dilemma, saying, “*Fight Club* oscillates between liberation and servitude, between escape from society and micro-fascism. Indeed, it is as if in *Fight Club* everything subversive turns out to be repressive: *Fight Club* is a *comedy of subversion*” (57, emphasis added). Ultimately, *Fight Club* belies the very message of a subversive potential that it attempts to deliver, with purposeful ideas that resist the interpellation of late-capitalist society, resulting in its being somewhat ambivalent.

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Abstract

**Body, Gender, and Power:
Reading the Illusion of a Subversive Potential in
*Fight Club***

Seonghoon Kim

(Seoul National University)

In David Fincher's 1999 film *Fight Club*, destructive totalitarian violence and vexing gender issues are intertwined with each other. Men in *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem*, quasi-anarchist organizations that use violence and terrorism in the film, resist the late-capitalist society. Their radical actions are based on a firm belief that they can recover their (lost) masculinity, as the film represents through Jack and Tyler, the protagonists equating the late-capitalist society to something feminine. In Fincher's film, the restoration of masculinity as resistance against society is paradoxical as it depicts men as victims of the feminized society, while making them subject to their own violence based on the idea of masculinity. In particular, through Marla Singer, the only major female character, *Fight Club's* representation of men's homosocial bonding unwittingly highlights and strengthens stereotypes of heterosexuality.

Key Words

Fight Club, Gender, Body, Masculinity, Subjectivity, Consumerism, Capitalism, Homosocial