

Everything's is a
copy, of a copy, of a
copy



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“ Everything is a copy, of a copy, of a copy.” (Fight Club) Adorno and Horkheimer know that this is true. Their analysis of American culture and society comes in a chapter of their book Dialectic of Enlightenment called The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception. Adorno and Horkheimer identify the ‘ culture industry’ as a phenomenon of capitalism that includes all products from Hollywood to the music industry.

These forms of popular culture are designed to satisfy the growing needs of mass capitalistic consumers for entertainment while adding to the lack of individuality each consumer faces. They emphasize how industrialization and capitalism played a crucial role in changing attitudes and characteristics of individuals, societies, and countries, as well as the societal conflicts over the last two centuries. Taking note of Adorno and Horkheimer’s qualification of society, David Fincher continues to echo similar concerns in his cult movie Fight Club. Starring Edward Norton, the unnamed narrator, and Brad Pitt as his alter-ego, Tyler Durden, the movie is generally looked at as a modern commentary on the vices of consumerism and how it has emasculated the modern man. This essay seeks to investigate how Fight Club portrays the nightmare of consumerism by attacking the masculinity of men and how the movie’s themes are studied by academics across the world.

Fight Club does has no specific genre but it is a deep psychological action film, which includes dramatic and thriller elements. In the movie, narrator has an easy, well-paid desk job but lives an empty and meaningless life with no family, friends, or goals. In addition, he suffers from insomnia and the empty consumer culture that he and those in a similar position have rapidly started to inherit. He frequently visits local disease groups in order to form

relationships with others and get rid of his insomnia. One day, he meets a stranger named Tyler Durden on a plane and begins to intently focus on his qualities as a person and salesman. Soon after he meets Tyler, there is an explosion in the narrator's apartment; the narrator ends up moving to Tyler's place and they become close friends. With Tyler's leadership, they form their own secret men's club called Fight Club, where young to middle-aged men brutally fight each other to let go of their frustrations. Durden's vices against capitalist society are further strengthened in his remark, " We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't. And we're just learning this fact.." Tyler Durden concurs with Adorno and Horkheimer's thought processes, basing most of their ideas on the negative effects of the capitalist system, not the whole picture. Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Culture Industry* identify the root of these negative effects in popular culture and the ' culture industry'. They pinpoint these as reasons for people's passive satisfaction and lack of interest in overthrowing the oppressive capitalist system. The culture industry forces people's emotions and actions through certain accepted values; there is no place for unique ideas or behaviors. For instance, the narrator lacking a name is an obvious way of claiming that no one is special in consumerist society; a name will not even make you different, so there is no point in including one. Fight Club is analyzed superbly when Adorno and Horkheimer discuss that the culture industry is a clever dictator. It does not exert any physical power over people. Yet, people may have serious " invisible" mental problems or unconsciously waste their qualities to behave according to popular values. Tyler Durden recognizes this systematic human error and tries to correct it

with Project Mayhem. However, he becomes what he set out to destroy.

Project Mayhem morphs from the wild fight clubs to a full-fledged dictatorship over those in the group. Durden exerts his mental power over the “ maggots” in Project Mayhem by repeatedly assaulting them both physically and mentally.

On the surface, Fight Club’s narrator seems trapped in a society of rampant consumerism where people are pushed (both by advertisements and by a general culture of materialism) to spend their money on things they do not need. Buying things then becomes their only source of pleasure. In this case, the narrator buys furniture to satisfy his craving for consumption, making him feel different from others with those items. The pseudo-individuality portrayed likens to a 1996 political cartoon by Clay Butler. The cartoon depicts a boy asking his mother if he could buy new clothes titled “ Rebel” or “ I’m a Rebel.” The boy is wearing a shirt and hat that say “ I’m Unique,” while ironically wants to buy back into the facade of individuality. The clothing in the cartoon depicts ‘ unique’ options or becoming a ‘ rebel’ for purchasing a shirt; this is only one example of pseudo-individuality. In the film, Fincher puts a Starbucks cup in almost every scene to drive home the message that consumer products and consumers eventually become virtually indistinguishable from each other.

Henry Giroux and Imre Szeman realize that Fight Club is more than Fincher’s critique on late capitalist society and consumption in their essay Ikea Boy Fights Back (part of The End of Cinema as we know it). The authors explain that “ Fight Club is finally less interested in critiquing the broader material relations of power and strategies of domination and exploitation associated

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with neoliberal capitalism than it is in rebelling against a consumerist culture.” (96) Specifically, the authors are referencing the narrator of Fight Club. He exists as the transformation from the emasculated man in consumerist society to one free of its shackles. For example, the narrator says, “ When you have insomnia you’re never really asleep, and you are never really awake.” He says this while watching an infomercial on television, so Fincher employs this as a commentary on how consumerist culture has lulled people into an insomniac state. Giroux and Szeman further this notion by clarifying that there is always a choice and people should not be bound to the things they think hold them in place. Tyler Durden exemplifies this throughout the movie. One of his most famous quotes comes when he talks to the narrator in a bar, “ the things you own, own you.” This not only applies to physical objects, but also to ones life’s choices. For example, in the film, Tyler Durden and the narrator go to a convenience store where Tyler pulls a gun on the cashier. He demands to know what he wants to do in life and the cashier responds “ I want to be a veterinarian but I don’t have the money.” Tyler turns to the narrator and criticized the capitalist system that prevents someone from doing what they truly want, hanging onto the insomnia. Giroux and Szeman reiterate some of the points that Adorno and Horkheimer make as well. In *The Culture Industry*, Adorno and Horkheimer realize that “ the culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises” (38) (convenience store cashier), and it molds people into what they become. *Ikea Boy Fights Back* echoes this when Giroux and Szeman identify that the capitalist, consumerist society “ rob(s) them of their primary role as producers whose bodies affirm and legitimate their sense of agency and control.” (101)

As Giroux and Szeman hinted at, *Fight Club* is at its core a critique of the emasculation of men by consumerism and the 'culture industry'. The narrator embodies this theme; his life consists of buying random Ikea furniture and attending support groups for men that have lost their testicles (literally). Moreover, *Fight Club* presents the argument that men in today's society have been reduced to men that do nothing themselves but have become accustomed with watching others do things instead. Masculinity becomes a brand, a means to sell products to men. This is evident in the many commercials directed at the audience and narrator. Following this, Allan J. Kimmel and Elisabeth Tissier-Desbordes conducted a study of thirty French men to determine the extent to which products, brands, and consumption play a role in the development of self-image and conceptualizations of masculinity. The study, straightforwardly titled "Males, Masculinity, and Consumption: an Exploratory Investigation," ailed four main issues reflecting the "denial of differentiation, the denial of consumption, the denial of the seductive nature of the male body, and the image of a man in daily life and advertising." An interesting intertext between this study and *The Culture Industry* is the mention of the "seductive nature of the male body." Adorno and Horkheimer claim that "by repeatedly exposing the objects of desire, breasts in a clinging sweater or the naked torso of the athletic hero, it only stimulates the sibilated fore pleasure which habitual deprivation has long since reduced to a masochistic semblance." (38) This validates the study's findings and how *Fight Club* embodies the sexual nature of men. Tyler Durden contrasts all of these qualities as a foil to the narrator. He does not conform to the society that the narrator drudges through. As a result, the Narrator, Tyler, and the other

members of Fight Club eventually reject this approach to living and try to find themselves. By putting themselves through the experience of fighting and facing fear and pain, they hope to strip away the unnecessary parts of their lives and discover their true, masculine selves. Subsequently, the threat of castration exists throughout the film. First, the Narrator meets Bob at a support group for men who have lost their testicles to cancer. Later on, Tyler and his men use the threat of “chopping your balls off” to get the police commissioner to call off his investigation into Fight Club. This loss of their manhood is the worst possible fate these men can imagine, particularly because they feel they have just begun to appreciate their masculinity due to Fight Club and Project Mayhem. While the fighting can be seen as an attempt by the men to reassert their masculinity, it is more of a rejection of what they have been told masculinity is by the consumerist culture industry.

Henry Giroux validates this interpretive problem but also presents small nuances that counter Fight Club's true intentions. In his essay titled *Brutalized Bodies and Emasculated Politics: Fight Club, Consumerism and Masculine Violence*, Giroux discusses many of the same points. Conversely, he makes the argument that “Fight Club defines the violence of capitalism almost exclusively in terms of an attack on traditional notions of masculinity, and in doing so reinscribes white heterosexuality within a dominant logic of stylized brutality and male bonding that appears predicated on the need to denigrate and wage war against all that is feminine.” (260) His claim that the crisis in the movie reduces it to only the vices of masculinity, not consumerism, is definitely how it can be interpreted. On the contrary, Fight Club does comment on how consumer culture affects all, not just men, in a

suffocating way. Giroux's claim that the masculine men in the film, and the film itself, wage war on the 'feminine' is absurd because Fincher presents the characters in a way that can be interpreted as praising women. Tyler and the narrator try to reconnect with their lost masculinity while discussing how women do not have to feel a loss of personality.

Giroux makes some amazing points on how the film itself is complicit in the consumerist practices it advocates against. He claims, "Fight Club signifies the role that Hollywood films play as teaching machines." (260) The film's themes and messages are not the only medium that conveys meaning. The meta-nature of Fight Club is not just simple entertainment, but functions as a public pedagogies as well. It itself is a product the culture industry, of Hollywood. Brad Pitt and Edward Norton are just consumer products brought before the eyes to portray the events that occur in the movie. Fincher, and the consumerist Hollywood industry as a whole, attempt to influence how and what knowledge we obtain from the art; essentially shaping the public thought and imagination. Giroux furthers his position by aligning himself with Adorno and Horkheimer on the "symptomatic [and] wider symbolic and institutional culture... that exerts a powerful pedagogical influence on shaping public imagination." (261) As previously discussed, the film itself is playing into the follies of the characters it portrays. Tyler Durden says it perfectly, "Everything is a copy, of a copy, of a copy," furthering the point that the film itself is another version of the same tropes and themes that give it its 'cult' following. Also adhering to Giroux's message, GrubHub (a food delivery company) has recently released an ad advocating for the consumer to 'want it all.' Titled We Want it All, the commercial depicts a

man ordering food on the GrubHub app while the song I Want it All plays in the background. It ends with many delivery men and women approaching the man's door with varying types of food from different restaurants. The ad adheres to Adorno and Horkheimer's principles of 'instant gratification' and Giroux's proposal that the culture industry coaxes consumers to consume. In addition, GrubHub is complicit in Durden's critique of copies in society. All the food, mostly fast food, that is brought to the consumer is generally a copy of the other; they are just calories to fill the void of hunger, as Fight Club is a movie to fill the void of boredom and individuality. Sharing the same consumer purpose, the ad and film are created to make money, through the art of film. In the end, everything is just a consumer product.

Fight Club is an important novel and movie that directs people to question the system by staying within the system. The movie, from Adorno and Horkheimer's perspectives, assimilates their ideas of the culture industry into a story that morphs from a typical man versus the system into the deeper understanding of emasculated men in a nightmarish, consumerist society. However, similar to Adorno and Horkheimer's position, it does not have a revolutionary character, the film (and character) just act revolutionary. The fighting in the novel is not presented as a solution to all of the characters' problems, but as a means of achieving a spiritual reawakening. The finished consumer product of Fight Club makes one a consumer of it as a product and its consumerized ideology on top of its box office numbers. The film is summed up with the modern anti-hero Tyler Durden shouting: "The first rule of the Fight Club is, you do not talk about Fight Club."