

Restoration of masculinity in fight club



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First rule of Fight Club: “ You do not talk about Fight Club. Second rule of Fight Club: You do not talk about Fight Club” (Fight Club, 1999). David Fincher has directed many brilliant movies in his career, including Seven, Fight Club, and most recently, Zodiac. His movies are known as psychological thrillers with multi-layers and many important themes; Fight Club is no exception. The 1999 movie is narrated by a man (played by Edward Norton) whose real name is never revealed, so we will refer to him as Jack in this essay. Jack is not the average masculine male figure. Masculinity can be defined as the trait of behaving in ways characterized of men, such as aggression and leadership (Santrock & Mitterer 2001). What we view as masculine is the “ aggregate of a complex web of characteristics, behaviours and traits that we have agreed to read as masculine” (Tripp 186). Jack, on the other hand, displays typical feminine characteristics, such as sensitivity and his need for material possessions. In today’s society, American men are facing a crisis since the feminist movement and the influx of women into the work force have left their traditional code of masculinity in a state of collapse. Henry Giroux states that “ the crisis of capitalism is reduced to the crisis of masculinity, and the nature of the crisis lies less in the economic, political, and social conditions of capitalism itself than in the rise of a culture of consumption in which men are allegedly domesticated, rendered passive, soft and emasculated” (1). This movie is appealing to most men as it attempts to reinstate the male character’s masculinity through the narration and glorification of violence. In addition, Jack’s fascination with Tyler Durden as his alter ego displays his desire to “ reassume a more primal masculinity” (Tripp 183); Jack, in turn, can represent the males in today’s post-modern society who feel entrapped in the feminized culture and are looking for a way

to re-establish their masculinity. The male viewers may also use the film as a form of escapism and/or a wish-fulfillment.” Violence is necessary in Fight Club as it reveals the instability of gender identity; in attempting to recover his manhood through Fight Club, Jack is able to take up both masculine and feminine positions” (Ta 265). Violent behaviour has always been associated with masculinity and the male gender, because of the aggressive trait that a stereotypical male should possess. This movie does not hold back on the amount of violence it uses, as violence becomes the basis for the major plotline. However, is the glorification of violence enough to restore a male viewer’s masculinity? Many movies contain violent scenes, but is that enough to appeal to a male viewer? Fight Club is more than just a group of guys meeting in a basement to take out their frustrations on each other. The club that Tyler and Jack create gives the men a place to “reclaim their lost manhood by stripping down and pummeling each other pulpily” (Ta 265). The deification of violence and beating up on one’s body is consistently referenced throughout the movie. Of the fights, Jack says “nothing was solved” but that “we all felt saved” (Fight Club, 1999). This demonstrates the men’s desperation to regain their masculinity through these fight sessions. There is another particular scene that displays this point of emasculation and self-inflicting pain through intentional fighting. Jack and Tyler are on the bus, and Jack looks up at a Calvin Klein advertisement with a well-built guy wearing nothing but underwear, and Jack asks Tyler “Is that what a man looks like?” in which Tyler responds “Self-improvement is masturbation. Now self destruction...” (Fight Club, 1999). Lynn Ta suggests that Tyler implies that “the only ‘real’ form of sex is to destroy oneself, essentially what Jack and Tyler engage in every time they fight” (272-273).

In addition, Tyler suggests that conforming to society's definition of a manly man is masturbatory, and that real men do not look beautiful, but rather have scars and battle wounds, which they both have. It is interesting to see a different perspective on the reason why the club was formed in this film. Daniel Tripp theorized that male protagonists in movies such as *Fight Club* "wake up" or come to a realization that the life they are leading is automatic to the post-modern society, and the male's masculinity has become "increasingly commodified in America's transition toward a post-industrial economy" (181). Basically, the constant strain that individuals feel in today's post-modern society pushes them into a conformed state, in which they think they want the material possessions and are, in extension, "manipulated by external forces" (Tripp 181). Therefore, the creation of fight club is not only a place for males to reinstate their masculinity, but rather it is a fight against the post-industrial economy. This club erupts into a much bigger fight, when Tyler creates an army, and ultimately, Project Mayhem. We see that Jack succumbs himself to the materialized world right from the beginning, as he is flipping through an IKEA magazine in his modernized apartment. The differences between Tyler and Jack are evident throughout the film, as we see that they are complete polar opposites, in many different ways: "If Jack is a model of packaged conformity and yuppie depthlessness, Tyler is a no-holds-barred charismatic rebel" (Giroux). Yet, later on in the movie, he realizes his alienation to this post-modern economy and says: "I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. I would flip through catalogs and wonder, what kind of dining set defines me as a person?" (*Fight Club*, 1999). Tyler's take on the capitalist society is evident in the film, and the scene that showcases this best is during one of the fight club meetings,

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when he gives a motivational speech to the men, saying: 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 white collars...Working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. 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. 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. (Fight Club, 1999) Tyler is the individual who does not care about the material possessions or commercialized life. He lives in a run-down apartment, wears anything but nice clothing and quits jobs when he does not like them anymore. This speech displays his frustration with the men in today's society; these men have not had to go through a Great War or Great Depression to show their worth and power. Tyler also makes a great comment in saying to the other men: " You're not your job. You're not how much money you have in the bank. You're not the car you drive. You're not the contents of your wallet. You are not your fucking khakis" (Fight Club 1999). Many individuals today are trying to live the American Dream, and get so caught up in it that they lose sight of the rest of the world. What you wear, where you live or what you drive does not define you as a person, nor does it reflect your personality. The twist at the end of the film is unexpected and the viewers may only realize that Jack and Tyler are the same person until this point. When this discovery is made, Tyler says to Jack: " All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I look like you want to look, I fuck like you want to fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in all

the ways that you are not” (Fight Club). This is the point when it becomes evident that Jack creates Tyler due to his repressed desires and to fill the masculine void. Jack’s disorder is known as Dissociative Identity Disorder, which is the presence of two more distinct personalities or selves, like the fictional Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel, and is the most dramatic and least common of the dissociative disorders. Each personality has its own memories, behaviours, and relationships; one personality dominates the individual at one point and another personality will take over at another time. The shift from one personality to the other usually occurs under distress (Santrock & Mitterer 2001). This domination of personalities is evident in Fight Club, as Tyler is the aggressive, dominant male of the two, and he becomes the leader of the fight club as well as the creator of Project Mayhem. Jack loses control of his alter ego and it is only after he “kills” his alter ego, Tyler Durden, that Jack can “finally reclaim control of his life and transcend his own self-alienation” (Tripp 184).

However, by this point, Jack has accepted his role in society, and learns a lot from his alter ego and his own desires in life. Sigmund Freud is known for his psychodynamic approach to many issues and problems in society.

Psychodynamic refers to internal motives, conflicts, unconscious forces and other dynamics of mental life (Santrock & Mitterer 2001). One of his theories suggests that men develop masculine anxiety and a fear of castration from birth. According to Freud, young boys realize that the equipment they possess is exclusive to their sex, and therefore, fear that they will lose it, and become a girl (Santrock & Mitterer 2001). This fear is evident throughout the entire film of Fight Club, with many explicit references to castration. One concrete example is the male character, Bob, who lost his testicles due to

cancer. Jack meets Bob when he starts attending a testicular cancer support group in an attempt to cure his insomnia. Ta suggests that Jack finds comfort among these men who have also experienced a sense of masculine loss. In addition, he is able to alleviate his fear of castration by surrounding himself with men who have physically undergone castration. Yet, the emasculation of the men in the group is a physiological one while Jack's is psychological (270). There are also many subtle references that should be mentioned. Tyler tries to sympathize with Jack after his place burns down, and states: "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" (Fight Club 1999). Jack agrees with Tyler, and it shows that losing his masculinity is the worst thing that Jack could experience, aside from losing all of his material possessions. Another important example is the end of the movie, when Jack (as Tyler) sets himself up to be castrated if he attempts to stop the bombings. Ta suggests that "Jack equates masculinity with the hyper-masculine world of Tyler, and the choice to escape this world is the choice of castration" (270). The consistent reference to castration reinforces the theory that this film is meant to define masculinity and the characteristics of a male in today's society. Freud states that individuals who suffer from anxiety disorders are experiencing a raging conflict among subparts of personality – the id, ego and superego. The id consists of instincts and works according to the pleasure principle. The id is unconscious and it has no contact with reality. The ego, on the other hand, deals with the demands of reality. The ego is called the executive branch of personality because it makes decisions based on rationality. Yet, the id and ego have no morality and they do not consider whether something is right or wrong. The superego,

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on the opposite side, is the moral branch of personality. The superego is often referred to as our “conscience” (Santrock & Mitterer 2001). This theory of id, ego and superego is also interesting to apply to Fight Club, as Tyler becomes Jack’s id; his pleasure principle. Tyler is not concerned with morals or societal standards, and only acts in the way that he wants to act. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Jack can be considered the superego, as he has a strict right versus wrong mentality, with no grey area. There is no ego present in this movie, as Jack and Tyler are two extremes. The absence of an ego means that there is no mediation between the id and superego, which results in conflict. The ego is considered the reality principle, and if an ego existed in this movie, then moralistic desires would be allowed. However, the ego may have taken over Jack at the end of the movie, in which he decides that the id needs to be controlled, resulting in the termination of Tyler. However, the absence of the ego makes this movie so interesting, and develops the clash between the id and the superego: Tyler and Jack. Like many popular movies, novels and TV shows, they act as a form of escapism to the viewers/readers, and can also act as a form of wish fulfillment as well. Fight Club can be used as a form of escapism to many male viewers as it gives the males a chance to put their own problems aside and escape into the problems of Jack and Tyler Durden. In reference to the form of wish fulfillment, just as Tyler is everything that Jack would like to be, the movie and the representation of men in the film is what many men may wish to become as well. Tyler does represent a great image of a “perfect” male: handsome in that manly way, aggressive, carefree, dominant, self-reliant and independent, among other things. This film is about young men having problems defining their manhood; Fight Club is able to fulfill many

wishes and desires that male viewers may possess, such as the strength to be an individual, to be aggressive or have leadership skills, and to be comfortable with the person they are, as opposed to what society expects them to be. Tripp makes a good point in stating that “ if we accept masculinity as a process of negotiation, then it stands to reason that the more we are bombarded by gendered images in our media saturated culture, the more we have to rethink, revise, and/or reorganize the sets of gendered generalizations that we perceive as masculine” (186). Fight Club attempts to help in this process, by allowing the male viewers to connect with the characters of the film through the narrative, the formation of a club and the glorification of violence, and in extension, helps the viewers to reinstate their perception of masculinity. Ta suggests “ Fight Club is the story of an individual who must torture himself into manhood” (267). The group is a place where the men can be men, without having to conform to society’s growing feminized workplace. In addition, she says that the tension between what is masculine and feminine in the film is necessary as the violence allows “ disempowered white men to take up the position of victim while simultaneously asserting their virility” (273). Fight Club is an excellent movie that allows spectators to escape into the world of Jack and Tyler Durden, using the narrative and violence to restore the male viewer’s masculinity through the characters. The club is useful to the men in the film for many different purposes: the restoration of their masculinity, a fight against the post-industrial economy as well as a place for men to escape from the feminized workplace. In discussing the purpose of Fight Club, Jack ultimately argues: “ The fight club is not about fighting; it is a manifestation of a desire to strip away everything and rediscover yourself” (Giroux). Works Cited

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