

# **A Copy, of a Copy, of a Copy? Exploring Masculinity Under Transformation in *Fight Club***

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## **Introduction**

Ten years have passed since 1999, the year that cinemas were hit by a number of influential, now modern cult classics on the state of reality and its representation: *The Matrix*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Magnolia* and *eXistenZ*. Perhaps most famously, if we are dealing with novel ways of articulating the realities of gender subjectivities, 1999 brought us David Fincher's adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club*. This movie in many ways marks the culmination of the tendency during the 1990s towards depicting masculinity on film in new ways (cf. Jeffords, 1994: 197). During the last decade, these changes have awakened a widespread academic interest, and *Fight Club* is clearly one of the films that are most often addressed by researchers and cultural critics wanting to probe the relationship between sexuality, politics and popular culture. The aim of this article is to use the existing body of work on *Fight Club* to develop a critique of academic approaches to screen textuality that attempt to fix readings in the terrain of gender studies.

The protagonist of *Fight Club* – "Jack" – is not only a young cynic insomniac, gone numb from the extreme acceleration of capitalism, careerism and consumerism characteristic of the late 20th century. He is also a white, heterosexual male. Beneath his apathy and frustration lies a subdued and introverted, but eventually violent and uncontrollable, rage. In the shooting script of *Fight Club* (Uhls, 1998: 39-40), the following dialogue takes place between Jack and his uninhibited alter ego Tyler Durden, right after they have had their first cathartic one-on-one showdown:

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- Tyler*           What were you fighting?  
*Jack*            My job. My boss, who fiddles with my DOS  
                     execute commands. Marla, at my support groups.  
                     Everything that's broken and doesn't work in my  
                     life. What were you fighting?  
*Tyler*            My father.  
 [A pause as Jack studies Tyler's face.]  
*Jack*            We should do this again sometime.

The story of *Fight Club* obviously has something to do with masculinity, male ideals, power or the lack thereof. And this is indeed something that many scholarly readings of the film have noted. Much like the raging disempowered husband and father running amok in Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993), similar to the character of Lester Burnham in Sam Mendes' *American Beauty* (1999), and in analogy with the exercises of genital exhibition, self-torture and disgust within the *Jackass* genre of reality television (Lindgren & Lélièvre, 2010), *Fight Club's* "Jack" seems to express a form of male obsessive compulsiveness. This is a condition described by Anthony Giddens (1992) as a consequence of men suffering a loss of sexual control in late modern societies. Many readings of *Fight Club* have, consequently, emphasized that it should be read as an expression of a threatened traditional form of masculinity desperately trying to regain its control by resorting to extreme violence. But, in fact, just as many have seen it as a criticism or subversion of stereotypical masculinity.

The socio-historical context in which traditional male identity and patriarchal power seemed to be fully legitimate and functional is often said to be on a steady decline (Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Faludi, 1999; Robinson, 2000; Butler, 1990: 7), and it could be assumed that the structural transformations leading up to this alleged state of affairs are also expressed within popular culture.

Research on masculinity has been an expanding field during the last ten to fifteen years, especially within cultural studies (Mangan, 2003; Berger, Wallis and Watson, 1995; Seidler, 2006; Whitehead and Barrett, 2001), and one of the most influential perspectives within this kind of research is social constructionism (Edley, 2001). This approach contends – and it is also central to the argument in this article – that masculinity is a discursive

product rather than a natural fact. Masculinity is collectively produced within society in a multitude of ways, one being through influential cultural acts of meaning making.

Masculinity and male subject positions are in fact dealt with, in more or less overt ways, quite often in mainstream cinema where different suggestions as to what a man may or may not be are performatively constituted. The theme seems to be most common within the comedic genre of fish-out-of-water stories about fatherhood, such as *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), *Kindergarten Cop* (1989), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *Junior* (1994), *Big Daddy* (1999), *About a Boy* (2002), *Daddy Day Care* (2003) or *The Pacifier* (2005). The more confrontational *Fight Club*, on the other hand, belongs to an emerging form of postmodern, and overtly political and moral, comments on post-backlash masculine identity. Such comments have been expressed in a diversity of films – spanning from the queer to the ultraviolent – such as the previously mentioned *Falling Down* and *American Beauty* as well as *Ma Vie en Rose* (1997), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *American Psycho* (2000) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

### **Polarization, Postmodernism and Polysemy**

In spite of the rather common-sense argument within cultural and media studies that cultural texts always have more than one possible meaning, most interpretations of *Fight Club* and masculinity still tend to argue that the movie promotes one singular cultural form of masculinity at the expense of others. Even though some of the researchers and critics who have written about *Fight Club* recognize that different readings indeed are possible, most of them still end up seemingly chasing that *one* definite reading. One example of this is the way in which Henry Giroux, on the one hand, states that:

Needless to say, *Fight Club* as well as any other cultural text can be read differently by different audiences, and this suggests the necessity to take up such texts in the specificity of the contexts in which they are received. (Giroux, 2001: 27)

On the other hand, he still resorts to the somewhat categorical contention that:

*Fight Club* has nothing to say about the structural violence of unemployment, job insecurity, cuts in public spending, and the destruction of institutions capable of defending social provisions and the public good. On the contrary, *Fight Club* defines the violence of capitalism almost exclusively in terms of an attack on traditional (if not to say regressive) 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. (Giroux, 2001: 6)

While Krister Friday (2003: 3) goes as far as calling this a "hostile reading," Suzanne Clark (2001: 419) points out that the violence shown in *Fight Club* may be able to do other things than simply reaffirm primitive forms of masculinity. Writing in direct response to Giroux, she contends that where he appears to see nothing but the violent and aggressive reproduction of male power, one might also see the possibility that *Fight Club* symbolically disrupts the discourse about violence and gendered identities in a way that leaves space for public discussion. tendency to read *Fight Club* in categorical terms – of which Giroux's critique is by no means the only example – is also recognized by Lynn Ta (2006: 265) who writes that the critical reception of *Fight Club* (the movie) has "exploded into an array of polarized discourse."

On another level, this polarization can be understood in terms of the different types of masculinity discussed by R.W. Connell. Connell's idea is that perceptions of gender are dependent on the cultural, social, and historical context. In different societies, at various points in time, diverse notions of what normal masculinity is come into being. Connell is careful to underline the relational character of masculinity. Masculinity, as a category, is only possible and conceivable in relation to other categories such as femininity. From this perspective, sex or gender are not objective and essential categories, but rather "a way in which social practice is ordered" (Connell, 1995: 71). When summarizing the relations and practices that constitute the core patterns of normative masculinity within the western gender order of the present day, Connell writes of a set of different forms of masculinity, the two most prominent ones in her argument being "hegemonic" and "subordinated" masculinity respectively.

She advocates a taxonomical approach that is surely useful when it comes to mapping different forms of masculinity by using ideal types. As this is exactly what Connell sets out to do, I want to emphasize that the following argument is not to be understood as a criticism of her conceptual categories. Rather, I want to use her terminology to show how the bulk of earlier critiques of *Fight Club*, no matter their other perspectives, have it in common that they work rather hard to establish that this text represents *one* particular form of masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity, according to Connell, stands for the type of masculinity that, at the present time and place, is regarded as the norm. It is defined as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (Ibid.: 77). Many examinations of *Fight Club* are reading it in terms of this particular form of masculinity. This interpretation is best performed by the above mentioned Giroux (2001; 2002; Giroux and Szeman, 2001a) whose main point is that while *Fight Club* seems to criticize the obsession of late capitalism with profits, consumption, commercialism and the market, it does not actually work to attack the relations of power that lie beneath these phenomena. Rather, Giroux argues that it is concerned with "rebellious against a consumerist culture that dissolves the bonds of male sociality" (2001: 6). He continues:

In this instance, 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. (Giroux, 2001: 6)

Giroux argues that *Fight Club* is part of a new sub-genre of films that combine spectacular violence with "tired narratives" of masculinity in crisis "along with a superficial gesture toward social critique designed to offer the tease of a serious independent/art film." According to this critique, it is just an illusion that *Fight Club* addresses pressing social issues. Instead, it is said to reproduce the very problems it initially seems to address. Essentially *Fight Club*, then, offers nothing but a "regressive, vicious politics" reconfirming "capitalism's worst excesses and re-

legitimat[ing] its ruling narratives" (Giroux and Szeman, 2001b: 33).

Giroux's reading, published in several forms, has been somewhat trendsetting as a number of other academics have come to similar conclusions. James Craine and Stuart Aitken (2004: 289) claim that the whole text of *Fight Club* "fosters a return of the sense of individual power lost to men through their marginalization in society." Kevin Boon (2003: 267) argues in a similar way when writing that *Fight Club* "exposes contradictions within culture that obscure and confound masculinity, prompting, among men, a nostalgia for displaced traditions."

Next to this type of reading of *Fight Club*, one just as often finds interpretations that – if we are to use Connell's terminology – connect it to the very opposite form of masculinity; that is, the subordinated one. With this concept Connell refers to different ways of being and acting that may indeed be expressed by large groups of men, but that are systematically excluded in dominant political and cultural contexts and thus, to varying degrees, oppressed. As Connell explains:

Oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men. Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity, the items ranging from fastidious taste in home decoration to receptive anal pleasure. ... Gay masculinity is the most conspicuous, but it is not the only subordinated masculinity. Some heterosexual men and boys too are expelled from the circle of legitimacy. (Connell, 1995: 78-79)

Among writers reading *Fight Club* in terms of subordinated masculinity we find Adrienne Redd (2004: 2), who states that the movie "is really about what it is to be a man who serves others (as women have traditionally) and how such men construct identity and meaning in their lives." While Redd makes her analysis in terms of class rather than of gender or sexuality – she concludes that it is not about homoeroticism but rather about self-love – other writers have still argued along those lines quite convincingly. Robert A. Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus write that

in *Fight Club* neither the film's protagonist, Jack, nor any of its other male characters are openly or obviously queer, nor is queer sexuality overtly depicted. Even so, the film is rife with an exuberant, though subtextual, homoeroticism that has been observed by both popular critics [...] and academic scholars [...] The inclusion of subtextual homoeroticism, the presence of which constitutes an egregious violation of the heteronormative order, is central to the film's ritual of rebellion. This subtext can be found in *Fight Club's* visual treatment of the fighting scenes, in dialogue and situations with homoerotic overtones, and in the relationship between Jack and Tyler. For example during fight scenes the [...] men are often caught posing in ways reminiscent of the men who populate the drawings of such homoerotic artists as Tom of Finland, as well as more explicit forms of gay pornography. (Brookley and Westerfelhaus, 2004: 314)

In spite of this, Brookey and Westerfelhaus eventually conclude that *Fight Club* is mainly to be seen as a heteronormative ritual. They contend that this firstly has to do with the fact that the DVD bonus materials accompanying the movie (Brookey and Westerfelhaus, 2002: 38-40) force interpretations in this direction, and secondly with the fact that the narrative of *Fight Club* ends with the death of homosexuality: even though *Fight Club* "flirts with the homosocial, it concludes with compulsory heterosexuality" (Ashcraft and Flores, 2000: 21). The main point, on which Brookey and Westerfelhaus insist, is however that "an oppositional reading that derives pleasure from the homoerotic elements present in *Fight Club* is certainly possible" (Brookey and Westerfelhaus, 2004: 319). This reading is also emphasized in some reviews of the film (O'Hehir, 1999; Taubin, 1999) and further by Karen Ashcraft and Lisa Flores (2000: 23), who see *Fight Club* as constituting "a window of opportunity through which to re-vision dominant masculinity" and as opening up a "space for criticizing hegemonic masculinity." Ta also writes of the homoerotic theme as being highly notable throughout the movie:

In the very first scene, Tyler stands over Jack, holding a gun that is placed firmly in Jack's mouth. The gun, as an instrument of pain and violence, comes to signify the surrogate phallus, thereby immediately framing the film in a

homosexually suggestive position. In the [...] diner scene [...], Jack and Tyler exit the bar and hang out in the parking lot. Tyler insists that what Jack really wants is to stay with Tyler since his condominium blew up. When Jack politely refuses, Tyler says, 'Cut the foreplay and just ask man.' After Jack gives in, Tyler asks Jack to hit him and the two have their first fight in the parking lot. After the fight, Jack and Tyler sit on the curb; Tyler is smoking and Jack, drinking his beer, says, 'We should do this again sometime.' This sequence of scenes plays out like a romantic date between the two: the evening begins with drinks at the bar, culminates in a fight that functions as the first sex/consummation scene, and is followed by the postcoital smoke/drink. (Ta, 2006: 272)

According to Ta, "Jack's melancholic loss of masculinity manifests itself in erotic self-flagellation with Tyler" (Ibid.: 237). Another critic who advocates a similar interpretation is Adrian Gargett, who writes that:

The male body is feminised through masochism. Shot in crepuscular supersensory half-light, that gilds male bodies as they assault each other, the *Fight Club* sequences are seductively such a perfect balance of aesthetics and adrenaline that they seem a solution to the mind/body division. [...] Tyler in *Fight Club* is positioned as an object of desire and identification. For Jack, alienated by contemporary consumer culture, Tyler represents an ideal of untrammelled power. He wants to become Tyler and is seduced by his aura. There is an ostentatious homoerotic dynamic to this relationship, which the film propels. (Gargett, 2001: 2-3)

As the above examples show, academic and critic discourse on *Fight Club* does indeed have a tendency towards polarization. While a rather substantial amount of writing, particularly about the movie, reads it as a reaffirmation of hegemonic masculinity, there are just as many who decode it in terms of subordinated masculinity. My point in the following is that these uncompromising and one-sided readings make a rather major mistake. It is – as argued earlier – highly questionable whether it is possible to make a clear-cut and unambiguous reading of *Fight*



*Club*, or any other movie for that matter. However, the large body of scholarship on this film makes it an ideal case study for understanding how readings of gender subjectivities on screen are formed.

One could understand the tendency among researchers and critics to claim that the movie is either about being "macho" or about being "gay" as having something to do with the ordering structure that Judith Butler (1990) calls "the heterosexual matrix," or "heterosexual hegemony" (Butler, 1993). According to her, the ever present presupposition that there are just the two mutually exclusive categories of man and woman – of masculine and feminine – leads to a counterproductive understanding of sexual identities. Such a dichotomous perspective fails to account for the "multiple and coexisting identifications" that may produce "innovative dissonances" that "contest the fixity of masculine and feminine placements" (Butler, 1990: 85-86). My suggestion is that the performance of masculinity in *Fight Club* need not necessarily be read in terms of the uncompromising heterosexual matrix, but that it could just as well be seen as expressing gender discontinuities.

Even though some have argued otherwise (cf. Rombes, 2000), it seems quite obvious that one reasonable way of looking at *Fight Club* is through the lens of postmodernism, and this perspective certainly provides some useful tools for understanding discontinuities and disruptions of the expected. Postmodern popular culture, of which *Fight Club* can be taken as an example, is composed of texts that – John Fiske (1987: 254) says – refuse "categories and the judgments they contain." It "crosses genre boundaries as easily as those of gender or class." Fredric Jameson (1991) emphasizes that postmodernism is a culture of pastiche and aestheticization; of quotations, intertextuality and random stylistic allusion. If we, like film critic Gary Crowdus, take *Fight Club* to be darkly satiric in its depiction of brutal violence and consumer enslavement, we can no doubt agree that it seems to fit this definition. Crowdus writes:

What truly distinguishes *Fight Club* [...] is its pungent satire, whose numerous targets include the soul-deadening consequences of excessive materialism, cynical corporate policies based on an indifference to human life, festering

workplace discontent, repressed male rage and gender-role anxiety, class resentment, New Age psychobabble, the emotional legacy for a generation of young men of physically or emotionally absent fathers, and a critique of the personality types who are attracted to political cults. (Crowdus, 2000: 47)

Furthermore, it can be analyzed both in terms of Jean Baudrillard's (1981) ideas about postmodern culture as composed of an endless chain of simulacra – of substitutes for a nonexistent reality. Much of *Fight Club* takes place in a dream-like artificial state of consciousness.

Jack yawns, rubs his eyes. They stay wide open. He punches another number into the phone. He sees a LEVITATING, STEAMING Starbucks paper coffee cup move from side to side in front of his face.

INT. COPY ROOM – DAY

Jack stands over a copy machine. The Starbucks cup sits on the lid, moving back and forth as the machine makes copies.

JACK (V.O.)

With insomnia, nothing is real. Everything is far away. Everything is a copy of a copy of a copy. (Uhls, 1998: 12)

While Frankie Dintino (2005) explores the idea of simulacra in relation to *Fight Club* further, others – such as Kate Greenwood (2003) – have understood the film as a visual enactment of Baudrillard's related notion of hyperreality, that is, the kind of postmodern reality that blurs with fantasy. But even if one should not agree with this argument that *Fight Club* is postmodernist – or even with the whole theory of postmodernity as such – it could still be argued that this movie is a bearer of many different potential meanings. In this respect, Dick Hebdige observes that:

Any attempt at extracting a final set of meanings from the seemingly endless, often apparently random, play of signifiers [...] seems doomed to failure. And yet, over the years, a branch of semiotics has emerged which deals

exactly with this problem. Here the simple notion of reading as the revelation of a fixed number of concealed meanings is discarded in favour of the idea of *polysemy* whereby each text is seen to generate a potentially infinite range of meanings. (Hebdige, 1979: 17)

It is however important to note that this "infinite range of meanings" is only realized potentially. As Stuart Hall (1973), argues, media texts do have a degree of determinacy on audience readings – but there is still substantial space for differences. Hall argues – along with others building on his tradition (Fiske, 1986; Perks, 2010) – that texts, rather than being completely plural, have a large number of possible readings, and that these are not equally available to the reader. The polysemy of texts is thus structured, which means that power relations that exist in society as a whole are mirrored by the text as well as through the ways in which it is read. This idea that any text is always open to multiple readings, even though these readings may follow certain patterns throughout audiences as wholes, lies at the very basis of the project of cultural studies as such, and it was formulated already by Roland Barthes (1964: 38-39). According to him, any visual cultural message implies a floating chain of meanings, even though society always tries to develop discursive techniques to fix this, thereby avoiding the problem of uncertain signs.

Postmodern pop-cultural texts such as *Fight Club* are rather extreme when it comes to this; at least they often *seem* to be more polysemous than many other texts. They excel in paraphrase, caricature, cartoon aesthetics, irony and cynicism. They blur lines between styles and intentions in ways that work to defy unequivocal analysis and criticism. Therefore, we must not be lured into trying to fix or resolve the ambiguity of texts such as *Fight Club* when we analyze them. This is because diagnosing it as promoting *either* hegemonic *or* subordinated masculinity means suppressing the possibility that it, for example, might promote none, or both of them, at the same time. Reading *Fight Club*, and its message on masculinity in some sort of crisis, in this more open way is thus – against the background of the above argument – not necessarily an expression of indecisiveness on behalf of the analyst, viewer or reader. Furthermore, it does not mean that *Fight Club* means

nothing and everything all at the same time. Rather, a comprehensive analysis sensitive to the complexity of postmodern visual language can acknowledge of the fact that our society, our culture, the times – the very conditions under which we live – are themselves multifaceted.

With Connell's perspective, it is only natural that the specific content of different forms of masculinity shift along with time, space and socio-cultural context. It is interesting, from such a perspective, to analyze how the imagery of *Fight Club* seems to be related to changes or shifts in the domain of masculinity. Is it constituted by and constitutive of a society where traditional and hegemonic masculinity is reaffirmed, subverted or subjected to some other transformation? In the next section, I analyze a number of key segments and themes of the movie in order to illustrate a number of contradictions, juxtapositions and ironies in its representation of masculinity, that all point to the fact that *Fight Club* must be understood in terms of a series dislocations and discontinuities – a process of transformation – within the field of masculinity, rather than of clear-cut power or subversion.

### **Reading *Fight Club* as Socio/Psychological Transformation**

Matt Jordan writes that *Fight Club* gives its audience "a sense that either masculinity or culture will have to go" (2002: 368), but goes on to say that the "answer may be that both have to change." In accordance with that insight, one might argue that *Fight Club* is not about either an aggressive reaffirmation of hegemonic masculinity, or a ritual rebellion against it. Maybe it is rather about realizing, and trying to overcome, the problem with current gender stereotypes. Terry Lee (2002) and Andrew Delfino (2007) both rely heavily on an approach sketched out by David Rosen (1993) in a study of how the heroes of classic works of fiction try to resolve tensions between dominant masculine ideals and actual male life experiences.

Rosen's conclusion is that the dominant images of what it means to be a man are continually shifting throughout history. And this takes place through a dialectical process wherein seemingly fixed masculine ideals are passed on to every new generation of men. But these ideals are always resisted in various ways, and that leads to the dominant and opposing images being brought

together into a new form of – also seemingly fixed – set of masculine ideals (Rosen, 1993: xiii). Butler (1990: 7) also states that "the premature insistence on a stable [gendered] subject [...] inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category." Taking that idea as a point of departure, it could be hypothesized that the hegemonic and subordinated forms of masculinity are in fact being amalgamated in *Fight Club*. If so, the one-sided readings are missing the more subtle forms of interplay between the respective sides, and the Butlerian continuum of gender subjectivities is then mistaken for a dichotomy.

Even though the narrative of *Fight Club* is not entirely linear, one could say that the first twenty-one minutes of the movie are mainly dedicated to introducing the protagonist, Jack, and at the same time to formulate a problem that has to do with late 20th-century western masculinity. This is the problem of feminization and disempowerment of men – the consequence of men being reduced to passive consumers and of men serving others. In the beginning of the movie, Jack walks around like a zombie due to persistent insomnia, the cause of – or solution to – which is unknown. He is presented as a corporate slave– a cynic, alienated and over-worked service class male who dislikes his boss and ironizes over business lingo.

Jack is just a cog in the large scale machinery of the capitalist corporate world: "When deep space exploration ramps up, it'll be the corporations that name everything: The IBM Stellar Sphere. The Microsoft Galaxy. Planet Starbucks." At one point, he states that: "This is your life and it's ending one minute at a time." He continues:

I was a recall coordinator. My job was to apply the formula [...] Take the number of vehicles in the field, A. Multiply it by the probable rate of failure, B. Then multiply the result by the average out-of-court settlement, C. A times B times C equals X [...] Every time the plane banked too sharply on takeoff or landing, I prayed for a crash or a midair collision. Anything.

Jack is, however, not only oppressed and subordinated within the confines of production, but also in his leisure time, as a consumer: "Like so many others I had become a slave to the

IKEA nesting instinct. [...] I'd flip through catalogues and wonder: 'What kind of dining set defines me as a person?'" This is, of course, a textbook example of what Connell means by "fastidious taste in home decoration," and we are soon made aware that Jack's problems are indeed related to his manhood and masculinity. "We used to read pornography. Now it was the Horchow collection." When Jack, almost randomly, finds consolation and relief by visiting a support group for sufferers of testicular cancer – pretending to be a victim – things fall into place. By watching Jack connecting to other men, who have suffered a more obvious loss of masculinity in the hormonal and biological sense, we realize that his "illness" is of a similar kind. We realize the double-entendre of the dialogue between Jack and Bob (another visitor to the same support group) earlier on in the film:

*Bob*            We're still men.  
*Jack*            Yes, we're men. Men is what we are.

As Tyler Durden enters the story, this whole underlying problematic is played out once again, but now in a more aggressive and explicit fashion. It becomes all the more apparent that Jack suffers from some sort of gender role frustration. His actual illness seems not to be insomnia but rather his conflicted gender identity. Instead of conforming with the hegemonic image of men as active, aggressive, heroic and powerful he works a meaningless job and obsesses over the domestic sphere.

Tyler initially appears as the perfect ally for Jack if he is going to overcome his situation. This is because Tyler is the exact opposite of Jack: "a tough fighter who thrives on being bad, not good; on living in a dirty pit, not an IKEA palace – on having women, not sofas" (Lee, 2002: 420). Later, of course, it turns out that Tyler is nothing but Jack's surrealistic doppelganger – a manifestation of an aspect of Jack's own personality. The theme of gender becomes even more obvious as the female character of Marla Singer initially fills the sole function of annoying Jack. She does this early on by interfering with his support-group tourism, and later in the story by causing trouble in the love triangle that is forming among herself, Jack and Tyler: "Marla. The little scratch on the roof of your mouth that would heal if only you could stop tonguing it. But you can't."

Anyone reading the introductory scenes of *Fight Club* in this manner will have this interpretation confirmed as the narrative moves on and the problem, as well as its proposed solution, is articulated in a more and more overt way, particularly by Tyler in numerous lines of dialogue:

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.

Why do guys like you and I know what a "duvet" is? Is this essential to our survival in the hunter-gatherer sense of the word? No.

We're a generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need.

Tyler's mischievous behaviour in general, and his introduction of the fight-club concept and its subsequent development into the cult-like terrorist group Project Mayhem – aimed at destroying all of modern society – in particular, is introduced as the solution to this state of affairs. In light of this, it could be argued that the interpretation of *Fight Club* which is in defence of the primacy of hegemonic masculinity is its "preferred reading." It is a reading that is in line with the idea that "gender requires a performance that is *repeated*" (Butler, 1990: 178; emphasis in original). It understands the actions shown in *Fight Club* as working on the symbolical level to achieve the materialization of hegemonic masculinity by way of "a forcible reiteration of [its] norms" (Butler, 1993: 2).

The preferred reading is one of the three interpretative decoding positions suggested by Hall (1973: 136-138). In this case, it would entail reading *Fight Club* in its most "transparent," "obvious" or "natural" sense. Consequently, the interpretations that emphasize subordinated masculinity – which bring the homoerotic subtext to the forefront – can be taken to represent what Hall labels an "oppositional reading." They represent a counter-hegemonic decoding strategy that rejects the dominant code. They may well understand the preferred reading but still choose to refuse it, instead bringing to bear an alternative frame of reference. But, as hinted at in the beginning of this section,

one might also bring a "negotiated reading" into play – one that acknowledges both of the above readings but which avoids opting for one of them. Such a reading is achieved if one looks at *Fight Club* as a socio-psychological process of disruption and change within the sphere of masculinity that is symbolically acted out in Jack's mind.

Norbert Elias (1939) introduced the idea that the long-term structural development of societies (sociogenesis) is mutually interlinked with changes in people's social behaviour and therefore in the psyche of the individual (psychogenesis). *Fight Club* can be understood in these terms: the whole story about Tyler Durden, the fight clubs and Project Mayhem can be seen as a representation of a psychogenetic process of change inherent in Jack's mind, which at the same time reflects a sociogenetic process taking place within western capitalism at the turn of the last century. We see in Jack – "IKEA boy" – a man who, due to reasons beyond his own control, fails to live up to contemporary ideals regarding what a man should be. His aggression and sexuality are suppressed, his private life revolves around the aestheticization of his home, and he works to simply "apply the formula." He feels inferior and frustrated because of his inability to answer to the cultural demands of hegemonic masculinity. If we interpret the violence in *Fight Club* as "virtual" (Lee, 2002: 419) in the sense that it is psychological rather than physical, it can be read in terms of a symbolic struggle between different ways of being a man.

The key to this reading is the plot twist towards the end recognized by Crowdus (2000: 46), who calls it "a startling self-discovery." What happens is that Jack discovers how fight club is starting to evolve into "a larger, much more destructive force" (Lee, 2002: 420). He then begins to question Tyler's intentions, and he gradually starts revolting against him. This leads to Jack's discovery that Tyler is actually an aspect of his own self. He realizes the insanity of Project Mayhem and eventually tries to stop it. On the one hand he fails, as the bombs do go off and the skyscrapers crumble, but on the other he succeeds as he mysteriously survives shooting himself thereby killing Tyler. The closing scene where Jack and Marla take each other's hands – and Jack says: "You met me at a very strange time in my life" – depicts the couple in romantic fashion seemingly entering a new



relationship. At this point, the closing theme – the Pixies' "Where is my Mind?" – of the movie fades in.

According to the negotiated reading influenced by Rosen, Delfino and Lee, what has happened here is a destruction, at the symbolic level, of oppressive hegemonic masculinity taking place within the confused psyche of Jack. In spite of all of the aggression, violence, sexism and machismo in *Fight Club*, Jack does actually become conscious of the absurdity of everything that is happening – that is, the absurdity of the ideal of hegemonic masculinity. While the final scene could indeed be interpreted in terms of a safe return to heteronormativity achieved through Project Mayhem, it seems more sensible to read it as symbolic of a reorientation following from the demolition of a destructive gender order gone awry.

So maybe *Fight Club*, in the end, could also be read as being about the transgression of gender stereotypes, about Jack's efforts in trying to find a balance between his own emotional life and the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. The support groups he goes to as a tourist while being an emotionally constipated man helps him express himself. When Marla appears, however, she interrupts this ability: "Marla. The big tourist. Her lie reflected my lie. And suddenly, I felt nothing." The fist-fighting becomes the relief from this therapeutic void. Through the brutality, Jack gets a temporal release, trying to solve his gender issues by way of hyper-masculine violent competition with other men.

Marla, who initially annoys Jack, finally becomes the key to his move beyond hyper-masculinity (Delfino, 2007: 70). While Tyler's relationship with Marla is purely sexual – "Except for their humping, Tyler and Marla were never in the same room" – Jack can gradually distance himself from Project Mayhem by opening himself emotionally to Marla. Re-read against the background of this argument, it is rather striking how *Fight Club* suddenly appears as "obviously" being a romantic story about love between two people, and its potential to overcome gender oppression.

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Suddenly I realise that all of this: the gun, the bombs, the revolution [...] has got something to do with a girl named Marla Singer.

*Jack* I'm trying to tell you that I'm sorry. Because what I've come to realize is that I really like you, Marla.

*Marla* You do?

*Jack* I really do. I care about you and I don't want anything bad to happen to you because of me.

If read from the perspective of Butler's ideas of gender as performance, in light of Elias' concepts of psychogenesis and sociogenetic, and against the background of Rosen's thoughts on the changing fictions of masculinity throughout history, *Fight Club* can be interpreted in terms of therapeutic self-negotiation.

What is played out at the psychogenetic level is a process of transformation taking place within Jack's own mind. He starts out feeling inadequate, and then embarks on an exploration of his own subjectivity and – what finally turns into – the extreme forms of hegemonic masculinity. This leads to him realizing its absurdity and opting to strive for a more balanced form of masculinity.

If we move on to the sociogenetic level of this process, *Fight Club* could be interpreted as reflective of an ongoing transformation of masculinity within western capitalist societies. The starting point of the narrative is a situation in which there is a tension between aspects of current actual masculinity (as represented by Jack) and the contemporary hegemonic ideal of masculinity (as represented by Tyler). In the end, we are introduced to the possibility that through the dialectical relationship between these two, a blended and more balanced gender model might be achieved.

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