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The Fiction of Self-destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralist

Jesse Kavadlo

Imagine what it's like to have your eyes rubbed raw with broken glass. This is what reading Chuck Palahniuk is like. You feel the shards in your eyes, yes, and then you're being punched, hard, your nose broken. Like the world is broken. Livid because there's violence, but there's sex, there's the bodily fluids that accompany violence and sex. Eyes rubbed in broken glass, first, then in blood and lymph, and you want more. That's just the plot. Don't even get me started on the characters. You should stop listening right now. Ok, they're nameless dual personality sadomasochistic anarchist neo-fascists turned rescuers. Or they're the last surviving member of a suicide cult turned domestic servant turned steroid-pumped Hollywood messiah turned rescuers. Or they're sexually addicted self-loathing hypochondriac medical school dropout con artists who pretend to choke in restaurants turned rescuers. Not counting the one about the mangled-former-model-and-the-transsexual-who-is-really-her-brother-but-she-doesn't-know-it, or the one about the mysterious crib deaths, or the one about the hidden rooms and human sacrifices. Don't count those. Count on fragments. And fragmentation. But, somehow, you keep reading. And after you wipe the pulp from your eyes, you realize something. That the world is not broken. Somehow, the world feels more together than before you started. This is what it feels like to read Chuck Palahniuk. Broken, but something disturbing and beautiful recreated in its place. And when you're done, you realize that everything really is all right. When you're done, you find yourself thinking about the books. And, maybe, if you're lucky, sounding like them.

This essay will focus on the ways in which beauty, hope, and romance remain Palahniuk's central values throughout his

seemingly ugly, existential, and nihilistic works, particularly in the novel and film *Fight Club*, Palahniuk's most widely recognized work, and *Survivor*, which I believe to be Palahniuk's strongest, most fully realized creation. That Palahniuk's harshest critics and most deferential fans mutually fail to notice these concerns becomes, I hope to show, central to the novels' aesthetic and moral imperatives.

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Emerging at the end of the 1990s, the decade of the Republican Revolution, Susan Faludi's *Stiffed*, and the Angry White Male, Chuck Palahniuk rose to prominence in part because of the 1999 film adaptation of his novel *Fight Club* and in part because of his offbeat subject matter and animated prose style. With over 300,000 copies of *Fight Club* in print, Palahniuk's following remains strong, particularly among young men, a demographic widely known to the publishing world for its reluctance to read. This appeal is unsurprising: combining violent surrealism, suspenseful noir, and psychological and narrative twists, the novels depict middling men who find themselves raging against political, economic, and social systems.

Palahniuk's popularity is more complex, however, than chronological or cultural proximity to the Promise Keepers or Million Man March suggests. His books' manic charm transcends a core readership of disaffected young men galvanized by the books' stylish nihilism, violent chic, or tongue in cheek contravention. On the surface, the books celebrate testosterone-drenched, wanton destruction: *Fight Club*'s nameless narrator finds relief from stultifying consumerism by forming an underground boxing network, but the violence escalates to attempted bombings; *Survivor* revolves around twin conceits of cult suicides and narrator Tender Branson's reversely-paginated countdown to a plane crash; *Choke* ends with the stones of the makeshift castle torn down and hurled at narrator Victor Mancini, who has deceived hundred of well-intentioned would-be rescuers. (Notice both named narrators have male-tinged names, BranSON and

MANcini.) On the other hand, despite this outward sadism, of pain inflicted on others, the violence in the novels also embodies a peculiarly masculine brand of masochism: "Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer," *Fight Club*'s narrator imagines. "Maybe self destruction is the answer" (49).

Yet the novels are less acts of fantasized revenge than elaborate rituals of self ruin. In *Fight Club*, the narrator's injuries, we discover in the ending's twist, have all been self-inflicted, because he and his nemesis, Tyler Durden, are, in fact, the same person. Two sides to a split personality, the narrator and Tyler turn their acts of sadomasochism into masochism alone. Palahniuk's narrators rebel against what the books position as the emasculating conformity of contemporary America (IKEA takes a bigger beating than fight club's members), but really what the narrator has been fighting, literally and figuratively, is himself. Taken as a whole, Palahniuk rearranges Freudian sublimation, projection, and discontent with civilization: in *Fight Club*, rebellion against the social order is transposed cruelty against the self, not the reverse.

More than millennialism, masculinism, or even masochism, however, Chuck Palahniuk's fiction embodies what I would like to call "closet morality." As Palahniuk's fans know, before September 2003—well into his career—Palahniuk kept quiet about his homosexuality. Fearing that her upcoming article would reveal that he was gay, however, Palahniuk angrily condemned *Entertainment Weekly* reporter Karen Valby on his fan website, The Cult. The article did not, it turned out, out him at all, and Palahniuk subsequently withdrew his comments from the website (Chalmers). In the ensuing years, Palahniuk's disclosure has not affected his perception or reception, nor, of course, should it. But the incident may provide a way of reading the novels: now, unlike his sexuality, it is only Palahniuk's morality that remains an open secret. Apparently Palahniuk could more convincingly disclose his sexual orientation than his compassion, which, despite his own protestations, remains in the closet: "I'm not a nihilist. I'm a romantic. All of my books are basically romances; they're stories

about reconnecting with community" (Interview), a claim he has reiterated in several interviews.

Despite the novels' façades of fury, Palahniuk's sexuality seems obvious in retrospect; indeed, *New Yorker* film critic David Denby and *Salon* book critic Laura Miller (both disparagingly) noted *Fight Club*'s homoeroticism, and Robert Alan Brook and Robert Westerfelhaus published "Hiding Homoeroticism in Plain View: The *Fight Club* DVD as Digital Closet" before Palahniuk came out. Of course, Palahniuk's sexuality is not important; instead, it is the concealment and subsequently dramatic means of revelation that provide an understanding of Palahniuk's particular, one might say queer, morality. In all of Palahniuk's novels, seemingly public, political acts of insurgence (not unlike outing oneself, irately, online, in spectacular, and spectacularly wrong, fashion) conceal that they are, in truth, long-suffering outlets for private, dispossessed spiritual desires (akin, for example, to concealed homosexuality). Palahniuk's closet morality manifests itself in the novels' subtexts and implications, rather than their context or language. Within his ostensible inclination to subvert literary and social mores—to offend the right with anti-consumerist, anti-family bromides, sex, and violence, and to alienate the left with potential misogyny and flirtation with fascism—Palahniuk places the romantic desire for connection, which even astute readers, in their enthusiasm or indignation, may miss. Amidst the novels' wreckage of bodies and buildings alike lie constructive, opposing forces to the inward and outward violence. Each novel—*Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Survivor*, and *Choke*, through *Lullaby*, *Diary*, and the recent *Haunted*, egregiously violent even by Palahniuk standards—ultimately proposes that what their characters, and all of us, need is—love. As Palahniuk writes in introduction to his nonfiction collection, "In case you haven't already noticed, all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people" (xv). He clearly feels that people haven't noticed. And he's right.

On the surface, Palahniuk's novels seem to embody the textbook existentialist tendencies, as defined and codified by M.H. Abrams,

> to view a human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning, and to represent human life—in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end—as an experience which is both anguished and absurd. (1)

More than an existential philosopher, however, Palahniuk is an American ironist in the tradition of Mark Twain, Nathanael West, Flannery O'Connor, Vladamir Nabokov, and Don DeLillo. Existence certainly seems futile and absurd when gratuitous brutality, infanticide, human sacrifice, suicide, and disfigurement come to seem banal and ordinary. Yet the characters' frequent celebrations and glorifications of masculinity, sex, individuality, and mayhem attempt to forge something palpable and real in a world where everything is a "copy of a copy of a copy" (*Fight Club* 21) or "the signifier outlasts the signified" (*Survivor* 88), a world of surreal simulacrum. Through Palahniuk's dramatic irony, however, readers have the opportunity to feel the redemptive powers of feminism, love, cooperation, harmony, and story telling, by inhabiting worlds were they are conspicuously, even absurdly, absent. Through his books' masculine embodiment but closeted feminist critique, their existentialist exterior that conceals the sentimentalism in the closet, Palahniuk conveys romantic notions in ways that aren't hackneyed, didactic, or unconvincing. (When the narrator finally reveals his attraction to Marla, she askes, "'Not love?'" His response: "This is a cheesy moment…. Don't push it" [197]). Palahniuk uses the term "communication," but I would extend it into communion: peace and love, certainly, but also the need for spiritual embodiment, and even the possibility of salvation

in a deadened world. To do so, Palahniuk substitutes black humor and muscular prose for excessive pathos and maudlin characterization. The problem becomes whether readers can get to the closeted moral and metaphorical significances beyond the books', readers', and even Palahniuk's own occasional macho posturing, again as evidenced against reporter Valby.

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In *Fight Club*, the narrator meets Tyler Durden, who seems to be everything that the narrator is not: aggressive, individualistic, charismatic, powerful. At the same time, however, Tyler's nihilistic Generation X critiques of an exhausted earth—"Recycling and speed limits are bullshit…. They're like someone who quits smoking on his deathbed" (175)—and post-Nietzschean philosophies—"It's only after you've lost everything…that you're free to do anything" (70)—have been taken too literally by both fans and critics alike. Durden is not a generational spokesperson; even within the fiction of *Fight Club*, he is a fictional character, a hallucination, another kind of copy of a copy of a copy, his own simulacrum. While throughout much of the book, the narrator is convinced by Tyler, and thus wants to "destroy everything beautiful I'd never have," (123), by the end, through Marla Singer, his antagonist turned love interest, he can find solace only in his attempt to save, not destroy, the world. After almost two-hundred pages of pummeling irony, he allows himself the sincerity to tell Marla, "I think I like you" (197), and in the end, just as the building they occupy is poised to explode, Marla says, "It's not love or anything…but I think I like you, too" (205). Fight club never saves the narrator, as he says it does early in the novel (51); instead, Marla does. But first the narrator, like the reader, has to look past Tyler Durden's allure to find her. When he can, the desire to destroy himself is rendered another kind of fiction, replaced by his desire for Marla. Though wounded and institutionalized in the book's final pages, he—and Marla—survive, and Tyler does not.

While critics and readers, like the narrator, naturally gravitate toward Tyler Durden, as the narrator reveals early on, "the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer" (14). The narrator meets Marla, ironically, of course, in a support group for men with testicular cancer, which neither, obviously, has. Instead, the narrator has been attending support meetings for patients with terminal illnesses to fight his insomnia; Marla goes, as she says, "'to have a real experience of death'" (38). The narrator's recollections of Marla, though, are consistently linked in the narrative to Big Bob (the film's opening cuts from one to the other), a former bodybuilder and the novel's only mother figure: between his cancer and resulting testosterone imbalance, Bob has huge breasts and no testicles. Like a mother, Bob uses his enormous breasts, hugs, and love to give the narrator his release, allowing him first to cry, and then to sleep, both infantile needs: "babies," the narrator tells us, "don't sleep this well" (22). While Marla is busy as his pre-Durden adversary, the narrator receives maternal, feminine care from Bob's pendulous breasts.

Marla's presence at the meetings, though, eventually gives rise to the narrator's own lie, and soon he can no longer receive Bob's respite. As the narrator moves closer to his own, and society's, destruction, substituting the macho violence and bloodshed of fight club for the support group's castrated hugs and tears, Bob's breasts move from mothering to smothering: in the film, when the narrator meets Bob again in fight club, Bob's breasts become the source of his suffocation rather than his succor, and instead of falling blissfully to sleep, the narrator passes out. By now, both the narrator and Bob have a new love object: Tyler Durden.

Indeed, throughout most of the book, it is Tyler, and neither Bob the mother nor Marla the lover, who attracts and preoccupies the narrator. And what makes Durden attractive to the narrator—his potency, wit, and sly subversion—are the same qualities that appeal to a readership of solitary young men. Critics of the film find it ridiculous that buff Hollywood idol Brad Pitt, playing

Durden, can sincerely recite lines like "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 (166). Henry Giroux calls it "a contradiction that cannot be overstated" (67), and *Salon*'s Andrew O'Hehir says "there's something more than a little ludicrous about sitting in a theater while Brad Pitt preaches at you about the emptiness of materialism."

What these critics see as contradictory or ludicrous, however, I see as comic irony to underscore the narrative drama. As attractive as Tyler seems, and that is the power of Pitt's casting, his philosophies are a fantasy and a delusion, as Tyler himself turns out to be. Even after discovering that he and Tyler are one, the narrator denies their connection: "I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I'm not" (174). Or as the film's Tyler/Pitt bluntly puts it, "All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I look like you want to look, fuck like you want to fuck, I am smart, I am capable, and most importantly, I'm free in all the ways that you are not." An epitome of the American masculine ideal, Pitt is a perfect Tyler, just the star most men would wish to play them, to borrow a conceit from *Survivor*, in the movie version of their lives. As a result, however, we must never take Tyler literally; to do so would be madness, as it is for the narrator, or fascism, as it is for the members of Project Mayhem. Palahniuk's moral fiction conveys, but ultimately warns against, both.

Critics, however, take Tyler, like Pitt, at face value: in a scathing analysis, Giroux calls *Fight Club* a

> morally bankrupt and politically reactionary film. Representations of violence, masculinity, and gender in *Fight Club* seem all too willing to mirror the pathology of individual and institutional violence that informs the American landscape, extending from all manner of hate

> crimes to the far right's celebration of paramilitary and protofascist subcultures. (71)

Yet Giroux, I think, substitutes what the film and novel depict for what they ultimately prescribe. *Fight Club* rails against consumerist conformity, but its alternative, Project Mayhem, the "protofascist subculture," to use Giroux's term, that evolves out of fight club, takes far more of its members' individuality—names, clothes, hair, identities—than consumer culture can. That is, until Bob—one Robert Paulson—is inadvertently killed by a police officer during a prank gone wrong. The narrator, now aware that his followers believe him to be Tyler Durden, attempts to put an end to Project Mayhem (178), but instead, echoing the language of fanatic religious martyrdom (in anticipation of *Survivor*) more than fascism, "only in death will we have out own names since only in death are we no longer art of the effort. In death we become heroes" (178). The narrator, however, no longer believes this, and Palahniuk's irony thus subverts Giroux's reading—the book's endorsement of violence, rather than the narrator, self-destructs.

Giroux's reading is understandable. *Fight Club* dares its readers to take Tyler—and his reactionary politics—at face value. But in addition to rescuing Palahniuk from his detractors, he needs rescuing from his admirers. More unsettling than Giroux's academic denunciation is the popular readership that identifies too strongly with Tyler Durden, exemplified by the angry, misogynistic letters *Salon* received after it published Laura Miller's scathing review of *Diary*. Yet again, fan reaction is understandable, if not excusable, considering Palahniuk's constant second-person "you" constructions: "You drill the wrong holes…." (11); "You don't understand any of it, and then you die" (12); "That old saying, how you always kill the one you love, well, look, it works both ways" (13) appear on the first three pages alone. This direct address, in its grammatical imperative, suggests the breakdown between the narrator and Tyler, and by extension, character and reader, around which the novel revolves. Like the

narrator, Tyler is alienated, angry, and politically, economically, and socially (although, crucially, not sexually) impotent. Judging by the online reviews and posts at cites like Amazon.com and The Cult, many fans emphasize how strongly they relate. Amazon.com reviews typically begin with a favorite Durden quote, yet some readers seem not to notice that he offers no viable or sustainable call for political creation, only metaphysical destruction—which, when enacted, becomes self-destruction.

In addition to these critical reactions and fan response, there is Palahniuk's own penchant for bombast. In a personal response to Miller's negative review, Palahniuk wrote back: "Until you can create something that captivates people, I'd invite you to just shut up." Palahniuk's interviews sometimes resemble Durden's aphorisms, and his nonfiction has explored personal experience with steroids, the occult, physical abuse, and the circumstances surrounding his father's extraordinary murder. Plus, there remains the *Entertainment Weekly* debacle.

It is thus tempting to read the narrators—and, by extension, the film *Fight Club*—to represent Palahniuk's politics. The novels themselves, however, are not mouthpieces for their damaged narrators; they are critical of them. Palahniuk may be angry at the same violent social conditions that disturb *Fight Club*'s nameless narrator, *Survivor*'s Tender Branson, and *Choke*'s Victor Mancini, but Palahniuk's solution is not more violence: it is to write books. It is revealing that his letter to Miller also states that "it's easy to attack and destroy an act of creation. It's a lot more difficult to perform one," emphasizing creation over destruction, as his books ultimately do as well. (The letter, however, like the Valby incident, was obviously self-destructive—as the ltter even concedes, writers may be best off ignoring critics—and it didn't help that he addressed the letter to Laura "Nelson," not Miller.) If Palahniuk's solution is books, his books' solution is laughter and romance. A careful reader will, like the narrator, be left unconvinced by Tyler's sophistry and instead notice that only his language, exemplified by Palahniuk's pumped up, brutally funny

style, is powerful. His solutions—to take the film's tag line, "Mischief. Mayhem. Soap"—are not.

Tyler Durden's indifference to suffering should not transfer onto the reader, who may identify with his position but also recoil, by the end, at the acts of violence. Even the narrator cannot remain morally neutral. If *Fight Club* embodies Giroux's "protofascism," it is in order to condemn it. In their brutality and futility, Tyler's followers, the nameless and faceless Space Monkeys, blur the lines between rebellion and conformity with the zeal of conversion, discarding tie-wearing, Starbucks-sipping, and IKEA-shopping by becoming mantra-repeating black shirts. The book's crypto-fascism is not unambiguously 1960's style anti-consumerism, per se, Tyler's charisma (and Brad Pitt) notwithstanding. It is, rather, a call to recognize that fascism is the endgame of a capitalist system that would reduce workers to drones and all personal identification to brand names and commercial transactions. Even family is implicated in the depersonalized strictures: the narrator notes with his usual detachment that his father serially divorced and started a new family every six years: "This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise" (50). The book's political subtext, far from right wing, insinuates that our cherished bastions of American liberty—the free market, liberal autonomy, and family values—come loaded with nascent totalitarianism.

The book establishes this potential for violence beneath each of its bland, bourgeois exteriors: because of the narrator's extortion, his morally bankrupt corporate workplace, which weighs the value of human lives against the cost of recalling a faulty automobile (30-31), finances the equivalently morally bankrupt Project Mayhem (in the film more clearly than in the novel); everyday consumer products like gasoline, orange juice concentrate, or diet cola become reconfigured as napalm, among other chemical weapons or explosives (13); from the medical waste dump, "'liposuctioned fat sucked out of the richest thighs in America'" is rendered into expensive, designer soap, to be sold

"back to the very people who have paid to have it sucked out" (150). The potential for danger and destruction lurks beneath seemingly harmless merchandise and benign consumer culture. Similarly, Tyler Durden is the split personality that "just happen[s] to have the same fingerprints" (195) as the narrator; he is the angry, murderous reverse of the innocuous pencil pusher. In the cultural logic of the closet, people and products alike have an unseen, balancing flipside that remains crucial to their identity, practice, and existence. Tyler's solution to corporate conformity and immorality, however, is anti-corporate conformity and immorality. The only viable alternative, then, is to reject modern masculinity's futile alienation and instead embrace connection, romanticism, and narrative, a seeming contradiction considering the novels' overtly male posturing, and their readership.

This is the Palahniuk paradox: the novels persuasively embody and give voice to the disenfranchised Angry White Male only to critique him humorously, relentlessly, and morally, from inside the novel's closet. Some readers may relate to or find truth in Tyler Durden's sarcasm and pop-hip existentialism—"you are not a beautiful and unique snowflake" (134 and passim)—but like the unnamed narrator, the reader must ultimately banish him if he is to survive. He may be a part of us, but a part that must be healthily suppressed—or, as it were, closeted.

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If *Fight Club* suggests a burgeoning tyranny lurking below the twin, shimmering surfaces of consumerism and family, then *Survivor* extends the notion further: here, the distinctions between family and faction, and between consumerism and cult, are eroded entirely. Tender Branson appears to be the last surviving member of the Creedish, or, as the media rename it, the Creedish Death Cult, for its members have all committed suicide. As the book opens, Tender is recording his life story into the black box of a plane he has hijacked, to be crashed into the Australian outback. Between the countdown and the expected crash, the book leaves few taboos untouched: suicide, murder, prostitution, pornography,

religion, and television receive the same irreverent, satirical treatment.

Like Tyler Durden, Tender Branson (a near-cryptogram of "Tyler Durden") frequently seems to channel Nietzsche, yet again I don't feel as though we should take his philosophy—"there is no heaven. There is no Hell…. Now anything is possible" (167) or later, "this is the upside of being eternally damned" (128)—literally. Here, we understand the remarks to be the opposite of Nietzsche's poorly understood "God is dead" pronouncement: the narrator is more controlled, less powerful, than ever; even in the absence of his once-believed religious absolutes, Tender believes more strongly in a universal order, a scheme of unchanging grand narratives, than he even had as a cult member. He is the opposite of Nietzsche's *ubermench*: weak willed, weak minded, controlled mentally, emotionally, physically. As the TV guru he is manipulated into becoming, he can parrot the jargon of self-empowerment as easily as *Fight Club*'s narrator could as a support group faker, but Tender is also a "tourist," always reading someone else's words in his teleprompter. Neither the cult of family nor the cult of American celebrity, however, offers him relief from his fear of death and fear of life, but his love interest, Fertility Hollis, can—not because she's omniscient, but because, in the end, she is not.

Unlike *Fight Club*'s unnamed narrator, Tender Branson's name is suffused with significance: as the novel explains, "Tender" is "not really a name. It's more of a rank….It's the lowest rank…. Tenders are workers who tend" (242-3). In the rigid hierarchy of the Creedish, the role of each son after the first (always "Adam") is to tend to others' needs. In addition, though, according to the Oxford Pocket Dictionary, "tender," as an adjective, means "easily cut or chewed, not tough," "susceptible to pain or grief," "sensitive, delicate, fragile," and "loving and affectionate." As Tender actively encourages desperate people to kill themselves ("try barbiturates and alcohol with your head inside a dry cleaning bag" [282]), he does not immediately seem to qualify as "tender."

But the word also means "requiring tact or careful handing," and Tender is indeed carefully handled throughout the novel, first by his church elders, then by his depraved employers, then by his manager, and finally by Fertility Hollis. Despite his outward hardness and meanness, though, Tender is indeed tender—loving and affectionate, as well as susceptible to pain and grief. Like Palahniuk's closeted sexuality, *Survivor*'s tenderness—ostensibly absurd in a character who is a victim and victimizer, who is manipulated and who manipulates so many—is in the closet yet in plain sight: in its narrator's name.

Despite any tenderness, though, Palahniuk's moral imperative directs his social criticism toward greater targets than fringe religions. As the book progresses, it becomes clear that whatever obvious criticism Palahniuk proffers toward the Creedish, those same criticisms apply to mainstream American culture. When narrator Tender Branson remembers the thousands of cooking and cleaning instructions that he leaned in order to be of service to his future employers, he understands that the teaching "made us stupid…. With all the little facts we learned, we never had time to think. None of us ever considered what life would be like cleaning up after a stranger day after day. Washing dishes all day. Feeding a stranger's children. Mowing a lawn. Painting houses. Year after year. Ironing bedsheets" (193). Add the possibility of also going to a *Fight Club*-style corporate job, substitute "husband," "wife," or "children" for "stranger," and the complaint is typically middle-class American. Finally, "Tender" is also a verb, meaning "to offer or present," with its accompanying nouns, "bid, proposal," as in legal tender (the phrase itself used on page 208). And that, in Palahniuk's social and moral criticism, is what Tender Branson, like too many Americans, has let himself become: a kind of legal tender, a means to an end, living capital ready for exchange, whether cleaning a house, urging suicide, or, later, telling people the proper spiritual way to live. Tender, like too many Americans, is indistinguishable from his tasks.

Tender begins to understand that everything he had been taught was fabricated, as artificial as the flowers that inspire him and that he tends with the zeal usually associated with the care of the living. Of course, since they are not alive, "the best place to find bulbs for forcing is in the Dumpster behind the mausoleum" (257), and while there, Tender wishes to be "chased by flesh-eating zombies," out of the romantic, wistful yearning that "it would prove some sort of life after death" (255). The notion is tender—immature (another meaning of "tender"), but suggestive of his emotional fragility and susceptibility to existential pain. The book then becomes a black-comic update of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn": Palahniuk examines the ironic tension between the immortal perfection and perfectibility art—or, for Palahniuk, the fake, the artificial, the simulation—versus life's flaws and finiteness. As the novel continues, Tender becomes a false prophet but makes real profits, in the process buffing his body through a Stairmaster (a kind of artificial exercise) and chemical supplements, wearing a wig when the supplements make his hair fall out, capping his teeth, bronzing his skin, reading the words of a Teleprompter, learning about cures that exist in name only (but "of course they're real" [146]), and attending his own televised, fake wedding (no love, no ring, no spoken words, and even the ostensibly fake bride is replaced at the last minute by an understudy), so that, as Tender says of the flowers, "from a distance, everything looks perfect" (71, paraphrased 257).

Perfect, while fine for fakes, demoralizes Tender. By the end, after Palahniuk's signature plot twists, each extending the trope of artificiality further: Tender's long-lost brother Adam is revealed as a murderer, Tender is a wanted man, and Adam, Tender, and Fertility Hollis invent a fictional terminally ill child and live in prefabricated houses before winding up in the Tender Branson Sensitive Materials Sanitary Landfill (a pornography junk yard), where Tender kills Adam at his request. Finally, Fertility pulls from her bag real flowers: "These flowers will be rotten in a couple hours. Bird will crap on them. The smoke here will make

them stink, and tomorrow a bulldozer will probably run them over, but for now they are so beautiful" (24). The life of the real flowers, however temporary and imperfect, is preferable to the artificial ones that haunt Tender, the mausoleum, and the novel's pages.

While *Survivor* begins with seeming trivia about how to "get bloodstains out of a fur coat" ("the secret is cornmeal and brushing the fur the wrong way" [269]), "get blood off piano keys" (269), "hide bullet holes in a living-room wall" (268), "repair stab holes in night gowns, tuxedoes, and hats" (265), or use "green-tinted moisturizer [to] help hide read, slapped skin" (265), these bits become another, if opposite, version of *Fight Club*'s homemade recipes for napalm and explosives: in *Fight Club*, behind the faces of regular, everyday products lie the means for terror and violence, much like the men who inhabit the world of *Fight Club* itself. Here, behind the world of stain removal or holes is the inescapable fact of bloodshed, a bullet fired, a knife used, skin slapped. *Fight Club* uses seemingly harmless merchandise to expose the potential for violence; *Survivor* uses everyday products to conceal that the violence has already been inflicted—and now exposed, it must be concealed. Somehow, soap and cleanliness are never next to godliness, and "the copy of a copy of a copy," at least suggestive of an original, gives way to sanitized suppression in the name of perfection. Tender's cleaning tips in the novel's opening lead directly to the conclusion's porn landfill, the *reductio ad absurdum* of the American hypocrisy, secrecy, obsessive compulsion, and misophobia.

Yet Tender continues to survive his mistreatment at the hands of his family, the cult, his employers, his caseworker, and his manager. He continues to tell the tale, even as the reader, more than in a conventional novel, is constantly reminded of the story's ending and finiteness by Palahniuk's reverse pagination (the story opens on 289 and ends on page 1). The countdown appears to be to the plane crash, explosion, and death, even as the novel concludes contentedly: "The sun is total and burning and just right

here, and today is a beautiful day" (1). The sentiment is far more Zen-like than existentialist, and, like Fertility's live flowers, suggests the immediate, divine, and sublime element to the present moment. To conclude, Tender both celebrates and laments the power of narrative: "It's all done. It's all just a story now," finishing in circular fashion, with the same "Testing, testing, one, two—" of the opening, a dash substituting for the completion that "Three" provided on the first page. The reader has no way to know whether Tender has miraculously survived, or whether the last dash is the final crash.

Ever the closet moralist, however, Palahniuk revealed his "real" ending on The Cult's website:

> The end of *Survivor* isn't nearly so complicated. It's noted on page 7(8?) that a pile of valuable offerings has been left in the front of the passenger cabin. This pile includes a cassette recorder. Even before our hero starts to dictate his story—during the few minutes he's supposed to be taking a piss—he's actually in the bathroom dictating the last chapter into the cassette recorder. It's just ranting, nothing important plot-wise, and it can be interrupted at any point by the destruction of the plane. The minute the fourth engine flames out, he starts the cassette talking, then bails out, into Fertility's waiting arms (she's omniscient, you know). The rest of the book is just one machine whining and bitching to another machine. The crash will destroy the smaller recorder, but the surviving black box will make it appear that Tender is dead. ("Ending")

It is curious that Palahniuk did not include this section in the novel itself. The reader, without this information, could fairly assume that Tender dies, although the book presents no way to show his death, since he himself is narrating. (The ending's dash, however, reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's many poems about

death, doesn't bode well.) The reverse pagination suggests a countdown to the crash, as opposed to the takeoff. But this optimistic ending is revealed in almost exactly the same manner as Palahniuk's sexuality: available on his website, but specifically and deliberately hidden to all but Palahniuk's 15,000 closest online confidants.

***

Unlike their narrators, who always experience a change of heart, the novels ultimately enact their own self-destruction, through their self-deconstruction—the ironic sense that the reader's cultural views by the end of the novel should be precisely the opposite of the views expressed by the narrator at the beginning, a kind of moral chiasmus. Again and again, the supposedly espoused machismo, masochism, and nihilism must be traded hastily for something else, and that "something else" seems consistently to be love. Once Palahniuk's narrators learn the truths about themselves, they turn to their book's love interest for redemption. In *Fight Club*, we must go back to beginning and re-learn the novel from the new perspective that the narrator and Tyler Durden are one, or that the barren Fertility Hollis is pregnant with Branson's baby, or that *Choke*'s "Dr." Paige Marshall, the novel's medical and moral guide, is really a patient, not doctor, in an insane ward, and so on. The stories, like the characters, self-destruct—but never completely. There's just enough left of them, and the narrative, to begin rebuilding, which is the very image that concludes *Choke*.

Palahniuk has pioneered a new genre, the fiction of self-destruction: his subject and subtext for all novels is, of course, self-destruction—fight clubs, explosions, and deliberate plane crashes suggest little else—but the novels themselves philosophically and narratively self-destruct as well, in their recurring irony and twist endings. Even the trope of self-destruction self-destructs—the stories that we thought we had read always turn out to be another kind of fiction: despite bullet wounds to the head (*Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*), car crashes and bombs (*Fight Club*), angry

mobs (nearly all books), a potential plane crash (*Survivor*), and bowel obstruction and public stoning (*Choke*), Palahniuk's characters are really hardy survivors, and the books, for all their shock and controversy, have fewer deaths than the average airport-bookstore thriller. (*Haunted* and *Lullaby* are the exceptions.) And when characters do die, such as *Fight Club*'s Bob or even Branson's goldfish, it retains its power to upset.

In the end, the books render the concept of self-destruction as unreliable and unsustainable and the bombs that fail to detonate at the end of *Fight Club*. In the film, of course, the bombs do explode, and the buildings indeed crumble, in pre-9/11 imagery that would surely never have been produced just a few years later. At the same time, however, the film ironically uses the metaphor to fortify, rather than demolish, the final romance between Marla and the narrator, by using the bursting bombs and imploding buildings as the literal backdrop to their replete romance, their explosive embrace. Their world, rather than ending, is just beginning. The film concludes with the humorous image of the "subliminally" spliced-in image of the penis, reminding viewers of the film's much-touted masculinity, but more importantly of the main characters' emerging sexuality and, self-reflexively, that what we're seeing is really just a movie. The romantic rock-soundtrack plays, the credits roll, and astute viewers experience the shock of recognition that *Fight Club* turned out to be, of all things, an uplifting movie.

If Palahniuk is ultimately too romantic to be an existentialist, perhaps that means that critics, including Abrams, have been too quick to characterize existentialism through the lens of Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*: "In a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusion and light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile… This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity" (quoted in Abrams 1). Jean-Paul Sartre comes closer to characterizing Palahniuk's moral fiction in his essay, "What is Literature?":

> However bad and hopeless the humanity which it paints may be, the work must have an air of generosity. Not, of course, that this generosity is to be expressed by means of edifying discourses and virtuous characters; it must not be premeditated, and it is quite true that fine sentiments do not make fine books. But the very warp and woof of the book, the stuff out of which people and things are cut; whatever the subject a sort of essential lightness must appear everywhere and remind us that the world is never a natural datum, but an *exigence* and a *gift*…. Thus, the writer's universe will only reveal itself in all its depth to the examination, the admiration, and the indignation of the reader; and the generous love is a promise to maintain and the generous indignation is a promise to change…; although literature is one thing and morality quite a different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative. (1348)

And indeed, despite his efforts to closet them, we do understand that with Palahniuk's aesthetic imperative—and his style and language are truly original—comes a moral imperative, as well: that we must communicate, love one another, and survive. Unlike Camus, Chuck Palahniuk is generous, and no one's exile seems irremediable. If anything, the opposite is true: the novel's circular construction always returns the plot, and its narrator, to the original point of exile. In the closet of postmodern apocalypses and existential absurdities, Palahniuk's novels are old fashioned romances. But they're not decked out in Brad Pitt-as-Tyler Durden's neo-hipster get-up. Tyler's vintage denim, red leather, wrap-around shades, and mussed pomade hairdo exist only in the film; when the narrator meets him in the book, Tyler is naked (32). Palahniuk may nod to designer nihilism, but he knows that the emperor has no clothes. Ever moral, Palahniuk instead insists that

despite their appetites for self-destruction, his characters, and, by extension, his readers, must live.

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"Even the *Mona Lisa*'s Falling Apart": The Cultural Assimilation of Scientific Epistemologies in Palahniuk's Fiction[1]

Jeffrey A. Sartain

Over the course of the 20th century, contemporary science has yielded astounding discoveries undermining of the deterministic, Newtonian epistemology ruling western thought since the Enlightenment. In the latter half of the 20th century, fiction writers took up the tenants of some of these new scientific discoveries, utilizing the paradoxical reasoning surrounding new conceptions of the nature of light, non-linear dynamics, and information entropy to inform their fiction. Many of these writers have garnered significant attention for crossing the traditional academic and cultural divide between the sciences and the humanities. Specifically, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, John Barth, and David Foster Wallace are the most well known of the contemporary prose writers who seriously study and include contemporary science in the formulation of their fiction. Since the mid 1980s, though, the language of contemporary science has become ubiquitous in contemporary culture thanks to the popularization (and often bastardization) of scientific discourse by popular the popular media, as well as artists, authors, and filmmakers who incorporate the themes into their work.[2] As a result, most astute viewers have at least a passing vocabulary in the major tenants of several serious scientific disciplines.

Here enters Chuck Palahniuk's fiction. A former truck mechanic with a degree in journalism, Palahniuk espouses no specific interest in the hard sciences of non-linear dynamics, particle physics, or information theory, yet the language of these scientific fields continue to permeate and infuse his novels. However, Palahniuk's works are a vibrant source of ideas and

critiques about the state of contemporary American literature and culture.

Palahniuk's most successful and recognized novels, Fight *Club* and *Choke* do not ostensibly deal with the formative concepts of 20th century science, but the novels carry the concepts of contemporary science as baggage in their narratives. Palahniuk's novels deal with scientific principles at an inconspicuous, almost subconscious level representing the general acceptance and assimilation of these principles into everyday culture. Phenomena from contemporary scientific thought, such as noise in information systems (entropy), non-linear dynamics (chaos theory), fractal geometry, and the complex binary paradoxes of quantum physics inform the most basic language and conceits in Palahniuk's fiction. For example, in *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden's quest to destroy the infrastructure of society and build something anew from the resultant anarchy is predicated on the vocabulary and concepts of emerging from chaos theory as well as those essential to an understanding of thermodynamic and information entropy. Similarly, in *Choke*, the narrator's mother, Ida Mancini, takes it upon herself to become a destabilizing, noise-inducing force in contemporary culture, mirroring the shifting understanding of entropy in relation to information and culture.

Bakhtin, Polyphony, and the Particle/Wave Paradox of Light

In *Problems of Dostoevsky' Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin postulates his theory about the novel as a form of polyphonic discourse. In Bakhtin's conception of the polyphonic novel, multiple voices are present in Dostoevsky's novels and equality between the subjective views of the characters is possible because a single, totalizing narrative voice does not preference one viewpoint over another. The theory of polyphony can be easily expanded from its focus on Dostoevsky to prescribe a method of interpreting novels in a general sense, and can serve as useful framework to consider the dialectic tension between the characters

in Palahniuk's novels. Simon Dentith, in *Bakhtinian Thought*, clearly articulates Bakhtin's notion of the polyphonic as a system for reading, where "[. . .] it might still be felt that other novels achieve the polyphony that Bakhtin celebrates. Perhaps novels can be placed upon a scale, with polyphony at one extreme and monologism at the other [. . .]" (45). For instance, when one places *Fight Club* on Dentith's polyphonic scale, both seem to fall heavily on the extreme right of the scale, appearing to tend towards rampant monologism because of their singular and characteristic first-person narration. However, in Palahniuk's novels, the first-person narration and point of view do not preclude the introduction of contradicting and complicating voices. Indeed, Palahniuk's narrators are often marked by loneliness and isolation, as Palahniuk observes in his introduction to *Stranger than Fiction*: "If you haven't already noticed, all my books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people" (xv). In their eagerness for connection and community, Palahniuk's characters tend to latch onto the ideas espoused by seductive individualist figures around them, becoming repositories and conduits for these other characters' opinions and ideologies, and thereby undermining the conventional privileging of a monologic viewpoint that usually occurs with first-person narration.

In *Fight Club*, Palahniuk's archetypal lonely narrator, Joe, continually has his beliefs, values, and motives brought into question by the opposing character of Tyler Durden.[3] Even though Joe is given the narrative voice and the implicit authority accompanying his position as narrator, the novel does not necessarily align itself with Joe's ideology. The narrative gives both Joe and Tyler's actions and ideas great significance, and no dominant, finalizing voice emerges. Neither character wins the epistemological tug of war; indeed, it is the war of beliefs between the two characters that is the foundation for all of the tension in the novel. As the novel progresses, the persuasive powers of Tyler's rhetoric and ideology almost completely subvert Joe's dominant narrative voice, undermining Joe's stable and prescribed

consumerist worldview. He becomes a spokesperson for Tyler's ideology, losing his own opinions as he observes "Tyler's words coming out of my mouth" (114). Eventually, Joe begins to battle Tyler's influence, seeking to retain his own identity and ideology in the presence of an overwhelming personality.

The tension signaling the dialogic nature of *Fight Club* does not end at the strictly narrative level; it extends beyond into the structural foundations of the novel. The novel's final chapters reveal Tyler Durden as only a separate personality of Joe's mind that has fractured to deal with the pressures of modern existence. With the revelation that Joe and Tyler are the same person, the dialogic tension of Bakhtinian polyphony seems completely undermined. However, the unification of Joe and Tyler into a single character does not preclude the existence of their separate and unique narrative voices, which is how Tyler and Joe's competing personalities must be viewed to support Bakhtin's notion of dialogic discourse in *Fight Club*. By symbolically killing Tyler in the novel's penultimate chapter, but simultaneously amalgamating all of Tyler's memories, beliefs, and experiences with his own, Joe becomes the ultimate dialogic character containing the full potential and knowledge of two mutually exclusive, competing identities and ideologies. At the end of the novel, Joe represents the pinnacle of Bakhtin's theory of democratic, dialogic space in a novel because within one body he contains the reconciliation of both Tyler and Joe.

Some of the most influential theories from contemporary quantum physics run parallel to *Fight Club*'s paradoxical structural, where two apparently exclusive characters share the same body. The most fundamental and problematic binary paradox encountered through experimental science is the contradictory evidence supporting the dual nature of light. Light, depending on how it is measured, demonstrates the characteristics of both particles and waves, phenomena that were previously considered mutually exclusive. As quantum physics has shown, though, light seems to be equally observable as both a particle and

a wave, and cannot exist solely as one or the other because either phenomenon cannot independently explain all of the properties of light. Gray Zukav observes the radical revision of conventional, deterministic epistemology that the dual nature of light forced: "For most of us, life is seldom black and white. The wave-particle duality marked the end of the 'Either-Or' way of looking at the world. Physicists no longer could accept the proposition that light is *either* a particle *or* a wave because they had proved to themselves that it was *both*, depending on how they looked at it" (Zukav 65). The dual reading of the nature of light leads contemporary science to consider paradoxes as viable and working phenomena in the natural world, where older, Newtonian physics cannot deal with such uncertainties because of the fundamental determinacy of the Newtonian ontology.

Much like the paradoxical nature of light, *Fight Club*'s characters Tyler and Joe represent a mutually exclusive binary that seems illogical, impossible and paradoxical to combine. Throughout the bulk of the novel, these two characters are portrayed as discrete individuals acting of their own accord, interacting, and leading their own mutually exclusive lives. Palahniuk takes great pains to separate the two characters, to describe their actions individually and delineate them as opposites, giving them contradictory opinions, beliefs, and appearances, thereby setting up the great paradox to follow. When Palahniuk reveals the true nature of Joe/Tyler near the end of the novel, the reader must reconcile these two diametrically opposed personalities, realizing they result from the same origin. In the novel, the moment of reconciliation occurs just a few pages from the end, when Joe notices that many of Tyler's memories are breaking through into his own memories, and he is finally becoming aware of Tyler's life outside of his own. He gains knowledge of Tyler's actions, and a type of self-revelation about the necessity of Tyler's origination:

> All the things that Tyler knows are coming back to me. [. . .]
>
> All of a sudden, I know how to run a movie projector. I know how to break locks and how Tyler had rented the house on Paper Street just before he revealed himself to me at the beach.
>
> I know why Tyler had occurred. (198)[4]

In the novel's final chapter, after Joe shoots himself, when he awakens in the hospital, he is a singular personality, containing the potential for both Tyler and Joe.[5] The ontological nature of the Tyler/Joe character and the fundamental paradox Palahniuk sets up for his readers demonstrates a familiarity and a comfort with anti-Newtonian paradoxical thinking. While Palahniuk never discusses quantum physics directly, the unification of Tyler and Joe metaphorizes the paradoxical nature of light, and the widespread popularity of Palahniuk's fiction signals a larger cultural acceptance of the working viability of paradoxical thought -- the assimilation of a scientific strain of anti-determinism into everyday discourse.

Homogeneity, Entropy, and the Noisy Reinvigoration of Meaning

Fight Club maintains a strong parallel with a fundamental shift contemporary physics regarding the concept of entropy, a notion rooted primarily in 19th century deterministic thermodynamics. In its original thermodynamic conception, entropy refers to the dissipation of heat in a closed system. In a closed system, heat will tend to seek a level of homeostasis making the heat distribution uniform across the system. Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner summarize the notion of thermodynamic entropy well: "Any closed system, one that does not exchange heat or energy with its surroundings, tends toward equalization of temperature, pressure, and other physical characteristics. Entropy

is a mathematical measure of the disorder and unavailability of energy" (205). One of the most famous common-sense proofs of this theory utilizes an imaginary bathtub. If one pours a bucket of hot water into a bathtub full of cold water, for a short time there will be a region of hot water within the cold water in the bathtub. However, if no other water is introduced into the bathtub, then the hot and cold water will blend, eventually mixing together into a homogenous medium temperature. Drawing upon the reasoning in the bathtub proof, the 19th century understanding of entropy leads to the conclusion that if ultimately the universe is a closed system, then the entire mechanics of the universe are winding down, headed for an eventual homeostasis called heat death, where all particles in the universe eventually arrive at the same level of energy, similar to the homeostasis of the water temperature in the hypothetical bathtub.

In the 20th century, advances in science, especially thermodynamics and information theory, reinvented the notion of entropy, and began to question the fatalism of the ontological ramifications of the notion of heat death. A thermodynamic conception of entropy aligned with deterministic thinking, like so many other types of deterministic thought, was undermined by the experimental data being generated by 20th century sciences.[6] In light of contemporary scientific thought, the notion of a closed universe is not a predetermined condition; therefore, the inevitable destiny of heat death predicted by the totalizing concept of entropy can always be avoided so long as new energy is introduced into the system.

In *Chaos Bound*, N. Katherine Hayles details the important reversal of entropy's connotations coming from mid-20th century research into communications theory.[7] The turning point for this conception of entropy as aligned with information came in 1948, with Claude Shannon's observation that "information and entropy were not opposites" (Hayles 49). Shannon's crucial observation opened up an entirely new conception of the value of entropic or chaotic systems, and allowed the formation of contemporary

information theory, which postulates that "The more chaotic a system is, the more information it produces. This perception is at the heart of the transvaluation of chaos, for it enables chaos to be conceived as an inexhaustible ocean of information rather than as a void signifying absence" (Hayles 8). From Shannon's original work, information theory's influence has branched out to a variety of fields, including the creative arts, literature, and literary theory, where the ability to create new information out of entropic systems opens up the abilities to create new meaning from such systems.

In such systems, unlike in thermodynamics, the notion of entropy does not always come loaded with negative connotations associated with death. Entropy still signals a shift away from order, but in the case of cultural systems, it signals a shift away from rigorous homogenization, devoid of meaning. Eric Charles White explains that to have any sort of meaning, one must avoid homogenization, the stasis of the information system. Meaning is achieved because "[. . .] order comes out of chaos, so sense requires nonsense. Meaning emerges not as predictable derivative but as stochastic departure from tradition, as *invention*" (268). 20th century conceptions of entropy utilize the notion of introducing noise into an otherwise clear system to produce meaning. William R. Paulson notes that "because of internal and external noise, and particularly the noise produced by language as a rhetorical system never fully present to itself, what 'arrives' is less clear and orderly (but more complex) that what was 'sent'" (93). Within the noise lies the potential for the vast, complex myriad and fluid possibility for meaning that can be found in the diverse world of human culture.[8]

Many of the seemingly random transgressive acts perpetrated by the characters in Palahniuk's fiction fall within an understanding of entropy as a force for renewal and meaning. The characters often focus their transgressive acts against the stagnated workings of a current social order. In *Choke*, for instance, Ida Mancini's ethos of 'prankstering' serves to unbalance the ordered social structures around her.[9] Victor, her son, internalizes her

belief in the power of transgressive acts until he's old enough to question her authority. As he states:

> The Mommy, she used to tell him she was sorry. People had been working for so many years to make the world a safe, organized place. Nobody realized how boring it would become. [. . .] And because there's no possibility of real disaster, real risk, we're left with no chance for real salvation. Real elation. Real excitement. Joy. Discovery. Invention.
>
> The laws that keep us safe, these same laws condemn us to boredom.
>
> Without access to true chaos, we'll never have true peace.
>
> Unless everything can get worse, it won't get any better. (159)

Ida's ideology of adventure, her belief in the restorative power of chaos serves to unbalance comfortable homogeneity. She, like many of Palahniuk's other characters, seeks to create meaning and potential for change through random chaotic acts.[10]

Palahniuk's strongest representation of entropy occurs in *Fight Club*, though, where the two main characters of *Fight Club* represent the different polarities of entropy: Joe as order and Tyler as disorder. The personal spaces allocated to each character tend to represent the relative order and disorder of their ideologies. For example, Joe lives in a highly organized condominium described in terms indicative of the rigorous order that pervades his life: "Home was a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals" (41). Conversely, Tyler lives in a house that is the apotheosis of disorder:

> The shingles on the roof blister, buckle, curl, and the rain comes through and collects on top of the ceiling plaster and drips down through the light fixtures.
>
> When it's raining, we have to pull the fuses. You don't dare turn on the lights. The house that Tyler rents, it has three stories and a basement. We carry around candles. [. . .]
>
> The rain trickles down through the house, and everything wooden swells and shrinks, and the nails in everything wooden, the floors and baseboards and window casings, the nails inch out and rust.
>
> Everywhere there are rusted nails to step on or snag your elbow on [. . .].
>
> The house is waiting for something, a zoning change or a will to come out of probate, and then it will be torn down. (56-57)

The house itself used to be a lavish, lush domicile, but disorder and noise have found their way in over the years through neglect. Now the house reflects Tyler's state of mind, which calls for disorder and noise to be brought into the otherwise organized system of contemporary American culture.

In an understanding of thermodynamic entropy, Tyler represents a very highly entropic state, chaotic and anarchistic, while Joe represents a very low entropic state, highly ordered and rigid. In contemporary American society, Joe is the much more valued individual because highly disorder, chaotic, or entropic individuals like Tyler are considered evil because they represent a challenge to ordered society, a subversive voice, and carry with them connotations of death. But when working within an understanding of entropy as a cultural force, the values placed on the characters are reversed, and Joe becomes the individual with negative connotations because when examining linguistic or cultural systems, having too little noise can a very bad thing,

resulting in stagnation and homogeneity. As Eric Charles White explains:

> The achievement of redundancy – when everything that needs to be said has already been said – is analogous to entropic homogeneity when matter-energy settles into terminal equilibrium. In cultural systems, then, just as in physical systems, noise or chaos amounts to a force for renewal. (268)

The highest levels of order in a cultural system suddenly become the surest path to the ultimate entropy, the death of meaning and interest derived from diversity and heterogeneity.

In order to preserve meaning and diversity, entropic noise must be introduced into the system from the outside, and the actions of Palahniuk's various characters from *Fight Club*, *Choke*, and his later fiction introduce noise and open the system. They disrupt, disturb, and destroy the carefully arranged workings of contemporary society. Their actions preserve the ultimate capacity of the human race for change and diversity by fending off totalizing order. In Palahniuk's apparent vision of the future, humans must act entropically to counter the ultimate heat death of the soul. As he states in an interview with Richard Speer, "Creating something new depends on destroying something existing." If humans do not preserve anarchistic, entropic impulses, humanity suffers an Orwellian nightmare of a society, where everyone is the same and no diversity is possible.[11]

The specific consideration of entropy in *Fight Club* returns to the inherent paradoxes of the novel, where a binary containing apparently mutually exclusive parts, in fact, turns out to be linked in a unified whole. Such is the case with entropy in *Fight Club*, on one hand Tyler functions as an entropic force, and on the other, he functions negentropically depending on what concept of entropy is being applied. He is both good and evil, as is the shared personality, Joe, who contains the same paradox as Tyler, both

entropic and negentropic simultaneously. The character of the narrator is simultaneously Tyler and Joe, and so contains a competing binary set of binary impulses in the two personalities. The status of the binaries, at all levels of characterization in the novel, shows the pervasive influence of paradoxical thought in the novel.

Characters, Chaotics, and Self-Ordering Systems

As even the most cursory glance at Palahniuk's novels suggests, one of the most prevalent themes throughout the novels, the creation of chaos and disorder, is intrinsically linked to the discussions of entropy in the novel because in the cases of information and culture, highly entropic states indicate highly chaotic states. Non-linear dynamics, popularly known as chaos theory, receives ample discussion in *Fight Club*, although like all other concepts from the contemporary science, it is not dealt with directly as a concept; rather, it is represented and metaphorized through characters and events. The novel comes preloaded with contemporary thinking about chaos theory, the notions of emergent systems -- how order arises from disorder (as is the case with the infrastructure of Project Mayhem arising from a disorderly movement, Fight Club, which holds at its core the quest for disorder) -- and the opposite, disorder arising from order (the split personality of Tyler originating from Joe's extremely ordered life). The catalysts of the creation of Fight Club within the Katherine Hayles notes the shift surrounding many notions of chaos in recent years, showing the culture is beginning to value natural events that ultimately have a negentropic influence. "The realization that entropy-rich systems facilitate rather than impede self-organization was an important turning point in the contemporary reevaluation of chaos. A central figure in this research is Ilya Prigogine, who in 1977 won the Nobel Prize for his work with irreversible thermodynamics" (Hayles 9). Hayles also reveals the

epistemological understanding of the binary at work in the dominant thought processes of western culture:

> That chaos has been negatively valued in the Western tradition may be partly due [. . .] to the predominance of binary logic in the West. If order is good, chaos is bad because it is conceptualized as the opposite of order. [. . .] The science of chaos draws Western assumptions about chaos into question by revealing possibilities that were suppressed when chaos was considered merely as order's opposite. (3)

According to Hayles, the notion of chaos has begun a radical transformation that is changing western culture's conception of chaos and order. *Fight Club*, as a cultural artifact, tends to act as a landmark signaling the transformation of chaos into an accepted phenomenon, where the hero of the novel is not the poster-boy for totalizing order in contemporary American society, but the representative of chaos and disorder, and as such, the end of the novel does not offer convenient consolation by signaling a return to the existing order.

Tyler Durden represents a segment of society valuing disorder over order, viewing order as something rare and temporary only occurring occasionally. At the beginning of the novel, Joe meets Tyler in a temporary state of perfection, overshadowed by a giant hand Tyler had created for himself out of logs on a beach:

> What Tyler had created was the shadow of a giant hand. Only now the fingers were Nosferatu-long and the thumb was too short, but he said how at exactly four-thirty the hand was perfect. The giant shadow hand was perfect for one minute, and for one perfect minute Tyler had sat in the palm of a perfection he'd created himself. [. . .]

> One minute was enough, Tyler said, a person had to work hard for it, but a minute of perfection was worth the effort. A moment was the most you could ever expect from perfection. (33)

The temporary nature of ordered perfection is highlighted here on the beach, and the rest of the novel becomes the story of Tyler's fall from perfection into chaos and disorder. From this point forward in the novel, Tyler represents ever-increasing disorder and entropy in the world. Even though his disordering of society's rules starts small, it eventually grows into the massive movements Fight Club and Project Mayhem, which themselves could be considered emergent orders arising from the chaos of Tyler's actions.

Joe creates Tyler for himself because he has to have a growing desire to break out of the totalizing order of consumerist, bourgeois society. Something about the order of Joe's life does not work for him, and he wishes for an injection of meaning in his life, an introduction of anarchy and interesting events to break the day-to-day monotony. Joe specifically talks about the first time he ever wanted anarchy, during a trip to Ireland. "You're in Ireland the summer after you left college, and maybe this is where you first wanted anarchy. Years before you met Tyler Durden, before you peed in your first crème anglaise, you learned about little acts of rebellion" (76). Beyond Ireland, Joe's desire for chaos and anarchy grows, as signaled by the mantra that he chants for himself shortly after meeting Tyler Durden. "May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect. Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete" (46). In the beginning, to stave off perfection, Tyler and Joe introduce noise and disorder into the society through small acts of rebellion. "Tyler and me, we've turned into the guerrilla terrorists of the service industry" (81), Joe notes when they begin their jobs as waiters, polluting people's food in creative and disgusting ways. From here, they move onto bigger and better pranks, introducing noise into society

on larger scales. For instance, Tyler works nights as a projectionist, and he has a hobby that entropically introduces pornography into feature films:

> You're a projectionist and you're tired and angry, but mostly you're bored so you start by taking a single frame of pornography collected by some other projectionist that you find stashed away in the booth, and you splice this frame of a lunging red penis or a yawning wet vagina close-up into another feature movie.
>
> This is one of those pet adventures, when the dog and cat are left behind by a traveling family and must find their way home. In reel three, just after the dog and cat, who have human voices and talk to each other, have eaten out of a garbage can, there's the flash of an erection.
>
> Tyler does this.
>
> A single frame in a movie is on the screen for one-sixtieth of a second. Divide a second into sixty equal parts. That's how long the erection is. Towering four stories tall over the popcorn auditorium, slippery red and terrible, and no one sees it. (29-30)

Representations of chaos theory continue to play out in the ramifications of the small pranks played by Tyler and Joe. Their small initial pranks lead to much larger, unpredictable effects, as the following passage[12] demonstrates:

> Tyler spiced a penis into everything after that. Usually, close-ups, or a Grand Canyon vagina with an echo, four stories tall and twitching with blood pressure as Cinderella danced with her Prince Charming and people watched. Nobody complained. People ate and drank,

> but the evening wasn't the same. People feel sick or start to cry and don't know why. (31)

Tyler's penchant for pornography leads to the disruption of people's evenings, even though they did not consciously see the single frame that Tyler spliced into the film. Something as small as one-sixtieth of a second disturbs people's entire evenings, even making them feel physically ill. Additionally, the polluted reels of film continue on through circulation, and the problem gets propagated to epic proportions as other projectionists add their own touches to various films. Who knows where the cascade of ramifications goes from there, but the implication is that the consequences for Tyler's pornography may extend into the future, having far-reaching effects.[13]

Such direct transgressive acts against established social and cultural structures appear repeatedly in Palahniuk's fiction, even though he recognizes the political climate of contemporary American culture and its tolerance for transgressive fiction shifted radically to the right with the events of September 11, 2001. As Palahniuk himself states:

> Transgressive fiction is loosely defined as fiction in which characters misbehave and act badly, commit crimes or pranks as a way of either feeling alive or as political acts of civil disobedience. […] They came all the way to September 11, 2001, when irony didn't die, but transgressional fiction died. Because suddenly any kind of transgressional fiction that was sitting on any desk in New York ready to be published was suddenly pulled off the market. Because any eco-terrorism, political terrorism, societal pranking, anything like that, suddenly was going to look like big, blanket terrorism. (Widmyer)

Guerilla terrorist acts in the consumer sector are privileged in Palahniuk's earlier novels. For example, Ida Mancini in *Choke* switches various hair dyes from box to box to "[. . .] mess with people's little identity paradigms" (66). Ida calls it "Beauty Industry Terrorism," and her little acts of rebellion introduce a factor of randomness into a carefully arranged system of confidence and trust between product and consumer (66). In *Lullaby*, Helen Hoover Boyle resents the durability and fixedness represented by antique furniture. As she says, "[. . .] furniture, fine, beautiful furniture, it just goes on and on, surviving everything. [. . .] Armoires are the cockroaches of our culture" (51). In an effort to introduce disorder and change into the permanence she perceives in antiques, she deeply scars the furniture with her keys as she walks past.

In Palahniuk's first novel, especially, his transgressive critique of contemporary culture is at its most forward and blatant. And again, the scientific discourse of the 20th century is buried within the language of *Fight Club*'s transgressive acts. The revolutionary movements in the novel, Project Mayhem, and its predecessor, Fight Club, structurally encompass the notion of fractal geometry, the mathematical techniques used to describe, graph, and predict the behavior of large, chaotic systems. Viewing Fight Club and Project Mayhem schematically as fractal patterns that spread across society closely links the movements with their underlying motives of chaos. Both movements, when described by the narrator, seemed to spread like wildfire through the disillusioned male culture of late 20th century America. Joe calls it "Organized Chaos. The Bureaucracy of Anarchy" (119). What eventually happened, as described in David Fincher's film adaptation of the novel, was that the organizations fragmented out across the country: "Chapters have sprung up in five or six other major cities already. [Project Mayhem] is a tightly regimented organization, with many cells capable of operating completely independently of central leadership." Palahniuk hints at the same vast, self-organizing structure to Project Mayhem with the final

pages of the novel, where Joe is occasionally approached by hospital orderlies with a black eye or stitches. They tell him: "We miss you Mr. Durden," "Everything's going according to plan," and "We're going to break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world" (208). Each one of the individual cells of Project Mayhem, when thought of in geometric terms, is an emergent orderly system, originating in the chaotic hodgepodge of society in its geographic region, and it resembles the other cells even though no two are identical.[14] Geometrically, Project Mayhem and Fight Club spread in a fractal pattern, each cell decentralizing and disassociating, but each cell still resembling the others in its structure, goals, and methods.[15]

The overarching realization of Palahniuk's fiction is most succinctly summarized in *Fight Club*, where Joe states: "Under and behind and inside everything the man took for granted, something horrible had been growing. Nothing is static. Everything is falling apart" (112). The specific phrase "Nothing is static. Everything is falling apart" gets repeated throughout the novel, used to refer to everything in society from paintings to pantyhose.[16] Initially, Joe's views are typical of contemporary American culture; he views things falling apart as a bad thing, and works hard to fight off chaos and entropy. He notes that before forming Fight Club with Tyler, his life was dominated by the futile fight against chaos and entropy. "It used to be enough that when I came home angry and knowing that my life wasn't toeing my five-year plan, I could clean my condominium or detail my car. Someday I'd be dead without a scar and there would be a really nice condo and car" (49). After participating in Fight Club, Joe comes to the life-changing realization that entropy and chaos are the dominant forces in the universe, and to fight against them is ultimately a doomed endeavor. The drastic mental shift is noted when he states, "I just don't want to die without a few scars, I say. It's nothing anymore to have a beautiful stock body. You see those cars that are completely stock cherry, right out of a dealer's showroom in 1955, I always think, what a waste" (48). Joe's

understanding of the world has swung 180 degrees: now instead of working to detail a car, he thinks a perfect car is a "waste." Chaos and entropy are the overarching themes of Palahniuk's novels, but they are presented in a way that is counter-intuitive for contemporary culture. Instead of viewing chaos and entropy as something bad that should be avoided at all costs, they are the fundamental forces at work in the world, and Palahniuk advises that one should get used to them, or insanity might follow because of the futile fight against the underlying chaotic forces of nature.

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Notes

[1]The Mona Lisa becomes a shorthand for Joe's evaluation of perfection in Fight Club, mentioned four times in total (41, 124, 141, 200). In each case, the Mona Lisa is the object of Joe's desire for chaos as he seeks to undo the perfection the painting represents.

[2]Contemporary scientific discourse has entered the popular discourse through a variety of texts, including, but not limited to Michael Crichton's Jurassic Park (1990), Steven Spielberg's Jurassic Park film adaptation (1993), and the resulting adaptations. In the novels and the film, Dr. Ian Malcolm is a mathematician specializing in chaos theory who predicts the breakup of the park. James Gleick's bestselling non-fiction survey of non-linear dynamics, Chaos: Making a New Science (1987) also added substantial popularity to the mathematical and scientific discourse.

[3]In the novel, Fight Club, the narrator begins referring to himself in the third person with the name Joe. In the more popular film version, however, the narrator (played by Edward Norton) utilizes the name Jack for the same third person narration. In actuality, though, neither the film nor the novel ever actually names the narrator, only the alternate personality, Tyler Durden, is ever named explicitly.

[4]The alternate personality of Tyler Durden seems to have surfaced as a response to the presence of Marla Singer. Tyler is a way for Joe to deal with his attraction to Marla Singer because he is unable to initiate any sort of an adult relationship with her.

[5]The film version of Fight Club deals with this moment nicely when Jack pulls the trigger of the gun in his own mouth. The back of Tyler Durden's (Brad Pitt) head is blown out, and he dies. When Jack realizes that he is going to live through his self-inflicted wound, he seems to take on a presence that he had lacked earlier. He orders the flunkies of Project Mayhem with cool confidence, and assures Marla (Helena Bonham Carter) that "everything's going to be fine." He seems to have unified his soul, which was previously driven into the diametric opposition of Tyler and Jack. Through a change in tone and body language, Edward Norton conveys the message that now the narrator's character contains Tyler and Jack simultaneously, instead of mutually exclusively, just as the novel shows Joe becoming aware of Tyler's memories breaking through his own.

[6]Jeremy Campbell, in Grammatical Man, summarizes the major theories associated with the shifts between thermodynamic entropy and entropy in information systems. He states that thermodynamic entropy, "[. . .] announcing that the universe is running down into a state of complete disorder, had a visible impact on intellectual fashions. And now, here, in [Claude] Shannon's work, this same concept made an appearance in a different guise, a new context" (18). The new context referred to is information theory, which later led to considerations of information and entropy in linguistic and cultural systems.

[7]For more, see Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver's Mathematical Theory of Communication (U of Illinois P, 1949), the seminal text in communication and information theory.

[8]Morse Peckham, in Man's Rage for Chaos, argues that art is the cultural equivalent of entropic noise in an information system. "After so many centuries of praising order, I think it is time to praise disorder a little, and to give the proper recognition to the [people] whose task it is to offer disorder, the artists" (40). He formulates a drawn-out argument suggesting the disorder offered by art is a biological adaptation of humans to prepare them to deal with disorderly situations in a world otherwise ordered by our biological perceptive mechanisms and our consciousness.

[9]I borrow the term "prankstering" from Palahniuk's essay of the same name, originally published in BlackBook magazine, reprinted as "My Life as a Dog" in Stranger than Fiction (55-60).

[10] Several characters in Lullaby represent similar perspectives on chaotic behavior, most notably, Helen Hoover Boyle's assaults on antique furniture. Additionally, Oyster and Mona's quest to use the book's central culling song as a tool for environmentalism and social justice causes chaotic upsets of established social orders. In Diary, Palahniuk describes the random detritus left by contractors inside of walls on construction projects, another example of a disorderly and all-too-human intervention in what should otherwise be an orderly project (26-28).

[11]Eric Charles White notes that freedom from a homogenized society is not "a feat that can be accomplished once and for all. Every effort to resist totalizing power constitutes a new domain within which power will again seek to maximize its control" (270). White points out the ironic implications of the nature of power, "that in undoing one system" people lay down "the foundations for another one, equally cruel and homogenous" (270).

[12]David Porush expains: "[. . .] intertwined systems display sensitive dependence upon initial conditions (The Butterfly Effect): Small, local inputs of information and coincidences (both of which are entropic processes) at the front produce global consequences for the entire system at the end" (71). See also Nobel Prize Winner Ilya Prigogine's Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature (New York: Bantam, 1984) and James Gleick, Chaos: Making a New Science (New York: Penguin, 1987) and

[13]"The first full frontal movie anyone can remember had the naked actress Angie Dickinson. By the time a print of this movie had shipped from the West Coast theaters to the East Coast theaters, the nude scene was gone. One projectionist took a frame. Another projectionist took a frame" (29). This is another far-reaching ramification of Tyler's type of activity that Joe notes. The film referred to here is either Dressed to Kill (1980) or Big Bad Mama (1974), although it is more likely Brian De Palma's Dressed to Kill because of that film's commercial success and widespread distribution.

[14]David Porush explains mathematician Ilya Prigogine's chaos theories, noting that often "dissipative systems arise in open systems" (70), as has happened with Fight Club and Project Mayhem. He also notes that dissipative systems tend to demonstrate "self-organization and irreversibility" (71), also characteristics of the revolutionary movements, Fight Club and Project Mayhem.

[15]Fractals are geometric representations of chaotic systems. They are useful for examining the aspects of emergent chaotic structures. "[Benoit] Mandelbrot's studies of chaotic systems revealed [self-reflexive patterns], beautifully embodied in fractals [. . .]" (Stoicheff 89). For more, see Benoit Mandelbrot, The Fractal Geometry of Nature (New York: W.H. Freeman, 1983).

[16]Later, Joe notes: "Nothing is static. Even the Mona Lisa is falling apart. Since fight club, I can wiggle half the teeth in my jaw. Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer. [. . .] Maybe self-destruction is the answer" (49). Again the sentiment is expressed, this time by Marla Singer. "Then Marla bought herself some really good pantyhose, the kind that don't run. 'Even the good kind that don't run,' Marla says, 'they snag.' Nothing is static. Everything is falling apart" (108).

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Fight Club and the Dangers of Oedipal Obsession[1]

Paul Kennett

The Narrator of *Fight Club* moves through a sequence of revolutions to resolve the dissatisfaction he feels as a faceless office drone and consumer. The Narrator considers his crisis of identification to be a crisis of masculinity, and becomes swept up in alter-ego Tyler Durden's obsessive quest to achieve identification through the classic Oedipal complex. Although the novel climaxes with an epic confrontation between the Narrator and Tyler, I propose that the true enemy of the Narrator is not his doppelganger but rather the narrative of the Oedipal complex. In a movement that starts with "self-beatings" encapsulated by the fight clubs and which ends with the Narrator's desperate attempts to halt the progress of the dangerous Project Mayhem, the Narrator continually reaches out to the narrative of patriarchy, rooted in the Oedipal complex, to provide him with a meaningful identity sanctioned in the eyes of a authoritative Other, a transcendent Father. The horrible violence that is unleashed by the Narrator's Oedipal fantasy leads him to confront Tyler at gunpoint, prepared to annihilate himself in order to banish his violent, patriarchal, fascist double. Sitting on top of the Parker-Morris building, the Narrator has an "epiphany moment," and yells, "I'm not killing myself, […] I'm killing Tyler" (Palahniuk 205). The Narrator's murder/suicide banishes Tyler and also removes the Narrator from his obsessive desire for Oedipal recognition. The novel condemns Oedipal patriarchy as a dangerous, fascist throwback and the Narrator must grapple with his reality by confronting consumer capitalism on its own terms; he must also take possession of the

[1] Portions of this article are excerpted from my master's thesis, "Simulations of Paternal Signification in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*".

various facets of his subjectivity and understand that his personal choices have serious consequences on the arrangement of reality.

Since much of the Narrator's movements towards revolution are predicated on Oedipal relationships between fathers and sons, and the recognition/interpellation that is central to this drama, I turn to Jacques Lacan's theoretic concept of the "Name-of-the-Father" as a model to analyse *Fight Club*[2].

Jacques Lacan's theories consider the role of the father in the Oedipal complex as a linguistic signifier that operates in the capacity of the Other whose authority provides subject formation. Thus the function of the paternal figure is not limited to the presence of a particular father in body, and/or in the immediate family, but is present and exerts its influence from the symbolic fabric of reality via historical, cultural, media and commercial narratives. Lacan writes in *Écrits*:

> […] the paternal function concentrates in itself both imaginary [the order of reality] and real relations, always more or less inadequate to the symbolic relation that essentially constitutes it.
>
> It is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law. (67)
>
> […]
>
> It is certainly this that demonstrates that the attribution of procreation to the father can only be the effect of a pure signifier, of a recognition, not of a real father, but of what religion has taught us to refer to as the Name-of-the-Father. (199)

[2] In addition to the texts by Lacan and Slavoj Zizked cited in-text, I am also indebted to Jonathan Scott Lee's *Jacques Lacan* for background on Lacan's theories

In these quotations the primacy of the symbolic ordering of reality is evident. The function of the "father" is transcendent, a principle that has its origins at the exact moment of the birth of human civilization. Lacan quips that since the identity of one's father is never certain, culture has inherited, via religion, the ideological construct of a father. Thus the function of the father in the Oedipal triangle is reified for all children regardless of the "real" relationship they may or may not have with an actual man in the household. In reality this function is so intimately central to the customs, rituals, institutions of our reality that the father will prevent the narcissistic enjoyment of the infant and establish the law necessary for socialization. In fact, since the Oedipal complex requires the symbolic murder of the father, "the symbolic Father is, in so far as he signifies the Law, the dead Father" (199)—thus, paradoxically, eternal and immutable.

The following passage quoted from Fight Club concerns a conversation between the Narrator and a mechanic who has joined Project Mayhem, who is quoting Tyler Durden's dogma on the subject of fathers and the Father. I quote at length because the conversation focuses the issues so clearly:

> The mechanic says, "If you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?
>
> […]
>
> How Tyler saw it was that getting God's attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all. Maybe because God's hate is better than His indifference.
>
> If you could be either God's worst enemy or nothing, which would you choose?

> We are God's middle children, according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in history and no special attention.
>
> Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope of damnation or redemption.
>
> Which is worse, hell or nothing?
>
> Only if we're caught and punished can we be saved.
>
> "Burn the Louvre," the mechanic says, "and wipe your ass with the Mona Lisa. This way at least, God would know our names."
>
> […]
>
> It's not enough to be numbered with the grains of sand on the beach and the stars in the sky. (141)

The desire to be "noticed" by God, and the desire for punishment are crucial elements of the Oedipal complex. The only way for a son to seize subjectivity is to confront and defeat his father. The Father imposes his Law, restricts enjoyment, and establishes boundaries for his sons. Tyler's desire for the animosity and punishment of God is nothing more than a desire to be properly interpellated into the Oedipal structure. Tyler's frustration speaks to his belief that he has not been so interpellated, and is therefore lacking the recognition of his status and the inheritance that comes with it.

Krister Friday, in "A Generation of Men Without History", deploys an analysis of *Fight Club* that suggests that the "men of Fight Club fear their exclusion from a teleological and/or eschatological structure to History, and as the narrator suggests, this structure of History is personified into religious, patriarchal terms". Tyler earns the love of his followers by: his open contempt for the History that has left them bereft, and his promise to impose a new eschatology that positions them as central players—to affect the course of events. The desire for the Oedipal narrative is evoked

in the space monkeys as a nostalgia for a "better time" in the past, when men were men, i.e. when men were important and significant.

Friday acknowledges the importance of recognition in subject formation and broadens his argument via the theories of Slavoj Žižek. He asserts how recognition by the Other allows the subject to imagine a place for itself in the "sliding metonymic signification that is the Symbolic order". The dynamic of recognition by the Other functions as an interpellative hail. Friday writes, as "Žižek explains, this interpellation means that the subject assumes a role it plays for the Other, and it is this role that confers consistency on the subject". In part, Tyler perceives History as the Other to which he addresses his appeal, a history that represents for him his desire for patrilineal consistency across time into which he would insert his revolution, to bring glory to the middle children of history. He assumes that the "Other's 'symbolic mandate'" is the "call to revolution". Friday concludes:

> the men of Fight Club await the return of a figurative, absent father and the historical recognition "he" will bring. The Father qua History is, in essence, the judgment of the future, the final (symbolic) context that will confer meaning on […] Project Mayhem, and the masculine identity that pins its hopes on both. For this reason, Tyler and his men don't care if they achieve "damnation or redemption" [Palahniuk 141]—all that matters is that they are recognized as having an historical identity as such.

In this respect Tyler hopes to establish an historical moment that will be eventually seen as a building block for a future golden age; it "is against the 'screen' created by the Other qua History that Tyler Durden projects and frames this figurative, historical erection that is Tyler's revolutionary time" (Friday). His actions anticipate the gaze of the Other and the recognition it brings.

The movement towards Tyler's revolutionary time begins with his fight with the Narrator, which is in reality a man beating upon himself. In the article "The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link", Žižek, writing on David Fincher's film version of *Fight Club*, considers the ramifications of the Narrator's various "self-beatings" and "self-abuses" towards articulating a revolutionary politics. Žižek centers his analysis around the scene in the film when the Narrator blackmails his boss by beating himself bloody and demands that his paycheques continue to be processed, despite his having resigned from his job. The scene is taken almost word-for-word from Palahniuk's novel; both scenes culminate with the Narrator clutching at his horrified superior's shirt, begging him to stop the beating, and says, "and right then at our most excellent moment, the security guards decide to walk in" (Palahniuk 117). Tyler performs a similar feat with his boss at the movie theatre and thus the fight clubs are assured of an income. Žižek is primarily interested in the implications of the Narrator's directing violence at himself and how, at this moment, he manages to manipulate a small aspect of the capitalist state to accede to his demands for pay without work, a small victory over the system.

Žižek argues that the Narrator is able to free himself from the demands of work by ridding himself of his identity as proletarian by enacting the sadistic fantasy of the lord, his boss, on himself, thereby "adopting the position of the proletarian who has noting to lose ("Masochist" 117). Further, he writes:

> The pure subject emerges only through this experience of radical self-degradation, when I let/provoke the other to beat the crap out of me, emptying me of all substantial content, of all symbolic support that could confer on me a minimum of dignity.
> […]
> Already at a purely formal level, the fact of beating up oneself renders clear the simple fact that the master is

> superfluous: "Who needs you for terrorizing me? I can do it myself!" (117)
> […]
> the only true awareness of our subjection is the awareness of the obscene excessive pleasure (surplus enjoyment) we get from it. This is why the first gesture of liberation is not to get rid of this excessive pleasure, but to assume it actively—exactly what the hero of Fight Club does. (119)

The Narrator's assumption of the "extreme excessive pleasure" he derives from his subjection to the consumer state as libratory mechanism promises a stage set for a truly revolutionary moment. In Žižek's opinion, the fight clubs function effectively to produce subjects who have wrested control of themselves. In this moment one could say that they have achieved the "enacted utopia", where "it is as if, in a unique suspension of temporality, in the short circuit between the present and future, we are—as if by grace—for a brief time allowed to act as if the utopian future is (not yet fully here, but) already at hand, just there to be grabbed" (122-23). In other words, the successful revolution "is, as it were, its own ontological proof, an immediate index of its own truth" (123).

The novel extends this revolution within the self into revolution with others in the arena of the fight clubs; it is present in the moment of the violent outburst of combat, symbolically a moment of "self-beating". The Narrator is careful to illustrate how the men standing in the bar basemen in the dim pool of light are identically clothed without shirts and shoes, how they assume the same habits of grooming, with short hair and nails, all mirror-images of each other. Each fight is therefore an occasion of fighting one's self.

However, Žižek argues that the development of Project Mayhem pushes the successful revolution so that it becomes a "fascist organization" that is "directed outwards" (121) at the Other, thereby effacing the intimacy with self and instead

reinstating the ironic distance that defeats the pure revolution. Tyler succumbs to his nostalgic symptom for the patriarchy of old and succumbs to the temptation to "regress into a proto-fascist macho logic of violent male bonding." (116)

In the same article Žižek characterizes "half-organized, half-spontaneous outbursts of violent attacks" as symptoms in a population that register an unconscious "awareness of the missed revolutionary opportunity" (120). He provides as an example the emergence of Neo-Nazi violence in Germany that he argues is symptomatic of nostalgia for the different Germany that might have been under Communism, "the missed opportunity for another Germany" (120). In similar fashion Project Mayhem emerges from the fight clubs, and transforms the revolutionary experience into a symptom of the Narrator's nostalgia for what, or rather, who, he might have been under a firm patriarchy. The indulgence in the obscene excess of pleasure that derives from his subjection to patriarchal consumer culture bleeds into another kind of excess, and results instead in "an exemplary case of the *inherent transgression*: far from effectively undermining the capitalist system, does it not enact the obscene underside of the 'normal' capitalist subject?" (120-21). Tyler is not satisfied with the personal, self-contained revolution that is found in performing the brutality of Other, the Father, on oneself; in this case the Other is rendered powerless. Instead, he pushes the fight clubs into Project Mayhem so that he might supplant the Other.

The Narrator outlines Project Mayhem thus:

> Tyler said the goal of Project Mayhem had nothing to do with other people. Tyler didn't care if other people got hurt or not. The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world. (Palahniuk 122)
>
> […]

> This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and right-away destruction of civilization.
>
> What comes next in Project Mayhem, nobody except Tyler knows. The second rule is you don't ask questions. (125)

Tyler resents the failure of metanarratives to provide him with the actualization of his subjectivity, blaming his absent father most particularly, and optimistically seeks to return "civilization" to a point where the narratives of privileged masculine dominance are still intact, where the God still walks among His people and recognizes them with his gaze. Tyler's promises that participation in Project Mayhem will teach all the men involved how to become their own masters, but the space monkeys are forever doing Tyler's bidding, they are contributing to his personal power by relinquishing their own. Tyler takes license to impose his own master narrative on his followers and subsequently on an entire civilization. His megalomania reaches its apex as he seeks not only to dismantle history but to replace it with a new order where his actions places him squarely in the role of the God/Father.

Tyler's agenda has moved beyond the potentially "successful" personal revolution proposed by Zizek into the military, guerrilla tactics of Project Mayhem. The space monkeys are romanced by Tyler's grand promises of a new world where they might all feel like important contributors. The purely personal revolution of the fight clubs involves a refusal of the Other, when in fact what they really want is for the Other to recognize and affirm them.

Thus the apparent paradox: self-actualization through the Oedipal family structure is only possible through the surrender of autonomy in favour of the structure of Law and prohibition administered and controlled by the Father. A man in such a relationship is not the master of himself until he has children, especially sons, of his own to control. Even then he merely repeats the actions of his own father. The deception that Tyler employs succeeds because his followers from the fight clubs and Project

Mayhem are all hungering for exactly this type of structure and control. He delivers nothing new but rather fulfills their desire for a flesh and blood father who structures and delineates the trajectories of their lives and subjectivities. As a solution to the paradox I sugesst that *Fight Club* articulates the Narrator's desire to assume the mantle of Other himself, and that his construct of Tyler allows him to do just that.

First, consider that the space monkeys also represent a split of the Narrtor's subjectivity—they encapsulate the part of the Narrator that is debased and abused by his boss, who is represented by Tyler. For much of the novel the Narrator performs his eponymous function—he observes and records the drama of Tyler and Project Mayhem. The fact that the Narrator is unnamed in Palahniuk's novel is crucial to the deployment of the split-personality agenda. Tyler becomes the idealized self who is always the boss, the always-dead and resurrected Father; the space monkeys become the despised interpellated self who is ecstatically beaten in order for the order to be defeated. Tyler and the space monkeys represent a father and his sons in the classic Oedipal relationship.

Consider also that if I follow the thesis that characters involved in Project Mayhem may be considered as projections of the Narrator's fragmented self, then his status in the novel as narrator positions him as the Other who organizes the roles for the subjects whom he narrates. Tyler is Father only because the Narrator desires it. The space monkeys become the sons of the Father who make possible Tyler's status as lawgiver, lord and punisher. It is also the space monkeys' complicity with Tyler's Oedipal narrative that lays the ground for the moment when Tyler "disappears" from the symbolic and his law is all that remains[3]. Marla is the screen for the Narrator's feminized self, arguably the

[3] Recall that Tyler's law is more authoritative than his self by the end of the novel—the Narrator cannot order the dismantling of Project Mayhem or the fight clubs because Tyler's instructions—to be castrated if he ever demands the termination of operations—carry more authority than his own mouth speaking contrary instructions.

final impetus that led to the manifestation of Tyler[4]. Whether corporeal or imagined, all these characters are shaped and constructed by the Narrator's gaze and the Narrator's language. Thus the Narrator's desire for substantial subjectivity is oddly realized not simply through the creation of his Tyler Durden alter-ego and the subsequent revolutionary activities of fight club and Project Mayhem, but moreover as he places subjects in "the sliding metonymic signification that is the symbolic order" (Friday). The desire to be given subjective recognition by the Other is always second to the meta-subjectivity of the Other—the one who assigns the roles. In other words, the revolution of Project Mayhem is a drama that exists in reality only so that it can realize its true objective—the elevation of the Narrator from lowly, feminized office drone to the status of the paternal Other.

Also consider how the Narrator's self-beating in front of his boss is successful precisely because the security guards, who cannot imagine why a man would beat himself bloody, will assume that the violence was in fact inflicted by the boss. The guards represent an authority that will assign roles to the Narrator and the boss, but only if the Narrator presses charges. The Narrator, through his self-abuse, doesn't simply subvert the contingent power structure but actually gains control of it. Once again his identity as "narrator" is subversive, for he takes advantage of the rules of the symbolic in order to author events to his liking.

Thus the irony of the novel is that the revolution remains an entity in reality as long as the Narrator believes that Tyler is a "real" person; in other words: the revolution of Project Mayhem qualifies as a successful revolution qua Žižek only as long as the Narrator believes in Tyler's ontological status as an individual. In the role of Tyler's sidekick the Narrator is still willingly ignorant of his own role of author and Other, and still considers that his

[4] The Narrator argues that Marla unsettles his therapy because of her parallel structure as a tourist; I contend that she also acts as testimony to the feminized space of the therapeutic groups. Her appearance, especially in the testicular cancer group, produced the Narrator's pre-existing doubts of the "manliness" of group therapy.

insecurities and imagined deficiencies are being played out in front of him. At the moment where he realizes that Project Mayhem is not just a story of revolution, not just an ideal masculine therapeutic space, but rather a physical organization that actually harms people, the Narrator becomes horrified and feels the weight of his personal responsibility. The epiphany comes with the sight of Bob's corpse.

Bob's corpse, lying before the Narrator bloody and unquestionably dead, is an intrusion of the real—Bob's corpse functions as a blot for the Narrator[5], the incommensurate or "uncanny" detail of the scene that renders all other features suspect and laden with latent horror. Further, the space monkeys take up a chant that gets relayed to all the fight clubs in the country, a new mantra they repeat together: "His name is Robert Paulson and he is forty-eight years old" (176). All members of fight club and Project Mayhem are nameless, but Bob's death creates a new dynamic, "only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes" (178). Bob's death is an intrusion of the real that has to be re-symbolized. The chant includes the corpse in the liturgy of Project Mayhem and abrogates the horror of the encounter for the space monkeys, thus sublimating the corpse's status as blot by stitching it into the linguistic fabric of Project Mayhem.

But for the Narrator the corpse is still a Thing, a small piece of the real that materializes as a result of his confusion and apprehension over the activities of Tyler. From his perspective, the symbolic network, to quote from Žižek in *Looking Awry*, "produces […] a body, the other side (the hero) reads this contingency as an 'answer of the real,' as confirmation of successful communication: he throws into circulation a demand, and the is demand is effectively answered" (31). Henry Giroux, in

[5] In *Looking Awry* Žižek considers the function of Lacan's concept of the "*point de caption* (the quilting point)" as a detail in an image that he renames the "blot" or stain. The blot is a detail that causes an otherwise perfectly natural and peaceful scene to "[become] 'uncanny', loaded with horror and threatening possibilities" (88).

"Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: Fight Club, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence", writes that Bob's body "enables [the Narrator] to recognize that Tyler has become a demagogue and that Fight Club [sic] has evolved into a fascist paramilitary group that is more dangerous than the social order it has set out to destroy" (11). The highjinks of the space monkeys take on a blot of the real, a horrible stain of excess. The price of the Narrator's relationship with Tyler is death, real death, the oppression of potentially millions of people, all symbolized by Bob's corpse. The Narrator stands in the middle of a fight club, raises his hands to a group of men who know him as Tyler Durden, and says, "A man is dead […]. This game is over. It's not for fun anymore". The Narrator's obsession with Oedipal recognition and his sublimated fantasy of replacing the godhead explodes into reality—his seemingly personal, existential dilemma has real consequences. The seeming unreality of his surroundings and the "artificial" placement of his subjectivity has unleashed a human machine bent on murder and mayhem.

In order to relinquish his fantasy of Other, the Narrator murders Tyler Durden and thus displaces a crucial actor in the drama of Project Mayhem. The act that accomplishes this murder is a gun to the mouth, as Tyler's hand merges with the Narrator's hand. The threat is unmistakeable, what is important is who actually pulls the trigger. As with most of the issues that surround subjectivity in this novel the answer to "who pulls the trigger" is: "both of them!" The shot banishes Tyler as fantasy construct; a murder performed by the Narrator. At the same time, the hand that holds the gun is also Tyler's hand. Since Tyler disappears with the shot, his "murder" of the Narrator can be considered as a suicide in a symbolic dimension. The Narrator also returns to the locus of the more successful revolutionary moment articulated by Žižek in that his final refusal of Tyler is reified in a moment of colossal self-abuse.

In *Enjoy your Symptom!* Žižek considers Lacan's claim that suicide is "the act par excellence" (44). Žižek explains the

difference between a subject performing an action that merely accomplishes a goal, and an "act" in the Lacanian sense, which he also designates as "symbolic suicide: an act of 'losing all,' of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the 'zero point,' [a] point of absolute freedom" (43). In this kind of moment, the subject must "renounce all symbolic ties," thereby removing him/herself from their relationship to reality and enters a state of "eclipse," a point where they no longer belong to the imaginary fabric of their reality, or, at least, certainly not in the dimension that they used to occupy (44). He continues:

> The act is defined by this irreducible risk: in its most fundamental dimension, it is always negative, i.e., an act of annihilation, of wiping out—we not only don't know what will come out of [sic], its final outcome is ultimately even insignificant, strictly speaking in relation to the NO! of the pure act (44).

In other words, the Lacanian act is not necessarily a dimension of the physical world, or even an action that affects the subject's reality, or even place within reality, but is rather an act of refusing their place and moment in reality. As a result the subject removes itself from reality to a temporary place outside reality, from which point the subject may choose in what manner to rejoin reality, i.e. in what symbolic dimension.

In other words, rather than wrestle with the placement of an Other in order to determine his subjectivity, the Narrator, in the face of the damage wrought by his patriarchal fantasies, decides to extricate himself from the symbolic entirely. The network of the Oedipal relation that depends on the Other is renounced in its entirety. Žižek writes that when, "towards the end, [the Narrator] shoots at himself […], he thereby also liberates himself from the dual mirror-relationship of beating: in this culmination of self-aggression, its logic cancels itself; Jack will no longer have to beat himself—now he will be able to beat the true enemy (the system)"

("Masochist" 117). The system, or the symbolic order in which we found the Narrator at the opening of his narrative, is one that has moved beyond the strict confines of the Oedipal complex and into the realm of the increasingly genderless consumer culture. By removing himself from his obsessive investment in the Oedipal narrative, the Narrator can shift his attentions to resolving his identity conflicts in the present and, more importantly, in relation to the present's symbolic arrangement.

The symbolic dimension of this allegory ought not to be underestimated: by virtue of his symbolic suicide, the Narrator's choice has a bearing not just on the arrangement of the imaginary, of reality, but on the very unconscious structure of the symbolic, and thus suggests an alternative arrangement to Oedipal patriarchy. Project Mayhem was actually poised to accomplish its revolution and resurrect the Oedipal Other. By virtue of choice, via the postmodern awareness of the contingency of symbolic structures, individuals can alter these structures to accommodate different paradigms and values. Fight Club positions itself at a time and place where Western men feel the past symbolic of the patriarchy recede and decay, are justifiably anxious and afraid of their seeming subjective deterioration, but are thus given the opportunity to make choices about how to participate in the new symbolic order that can be raised from the ashes.

It must be admitted that *Fight Club* does not dramatize the Narrator's return to reality, leaving the reader with the uncertainty that he might in fact choose a life as Tyler Durden. It also bears consideration that by murdering Tyler, the Narrator has committed the patricide necessary to complete the Oedipal complex. But the menace constructed around this "threat" by the text and the Narrator's own assertion that he cannot yet return to Marla due to his fear of the call to reclaim his crown as Tyler is enough to foreshadow his eventual decision. It can be noted as well that in the film version of Fight Club, the curtain falls on a shot of the Narrator and Marla embracing at the top of a skyscraper, Tyler

banished by the "suicide" and the promise of a whole new world unfolds in their union against the backdrop of the world's major financial centers falling to the ground. The old world falls away in the promise of a new symbolic order.

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The Death of Sisyphus: Existentialist Literature and the Cultural Logic of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

Robert Bennett

> *Sisyphus is the absurd hero. . . . Thus convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human . . . Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart.*
>
> Albert Camus, from *The Myth of Sisyphus*

> *I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God's got this all wrong.*
> *We are not special.*
> *We are not crap, either.*
> *We just are.*
> *We just are, and what happens just happens.*
> *And God says, "No that's not right."*
> *Yeah. Well. Whatever. You can't teach God anything.*
>
> Chuck Palahniuk, from *Fight Club*

Few works of contemporary literature have provoked the level of critical controversy sparked by the publication of Chuck Palahniuk's novel, *Fight Club* (1996), and David Fincher's adaptation of Palahniuk's novel in the film, *Fight Club* (1999).[1] On the one hand, writers and literary critics have hailed Palahniuk's novel as a "wild, orgiastic pop

[1]Given that both the novel and the film share the same name, I will use the generic *Fight Club* when I wish to discuss issues commonly shared by both the novel and the film. To distinguish between the novel and the film, I will either use either the author's and director's names, or I will refer to the publication and release dates, using *Fight Club* (1996) to refer to the novel and *Fight Club* (1999) to refer to the film.

masterpiece" that "rages" against the hypocrisy of a society that continually promises us the impossible" (Ellis 15), while film critics have described Fincher's film as "stunning, mordantly funny, [and] formally dazzling" (Smith 58) and applauded its "Swiftian attack on our consumerist, designer-label-worshipping society" (Taubin 16). In 2005, *Total Film* went so far as to declare *Fight Club* no less than the "Greatest Film of Our Lifetime" (Pierce 22). At the same time, however, many critics have attacked *Fight Club* with a similar ferocity. For example, Mark Pettus criticizes Palahniuk's novel for "ultimately fail[ing]" to rebel against consumer society because its "challenge reproduces the system's models and values" (111), while Henry A. Giroux has lambasted Fincher's film its "intensely misogynistic representation of women," its glorification of violent, hypermasculine "warrior culture," and its reactionary "vision of liberation and politics [which] relies on gendered and sexist hierarchies that flow directly from the consumer culture it claims to be criticizing" (17, 12, 15). In a fit of near critical hysteria, Alexander Walker has even denounced the film as "a threatening revival of Nazism" that "uncritically enshrines principles that once underpinned the politics of fascism, and ultimately sent millions of Jews to the death camps" (29).

Aptly summarizing the critical reception of both the novel and the film, Gary Crowdus argues that most people react to *Fight Club* on one "side of a love/hate divide": finding the film "either wildly funny or morally reprehensible," audiences have either praised it for "speaking to them in a meaningful way that few movies ever have," or they have called for it to be "censored and the filmmakers hauled before a congressional committee" (33). Oscillating wildly between reverential adulation and vitriolic attacks, *Fight Club*'s bi-polar critical reception suggests that it has struck some kind of "raw nerve" within contemporary culture (Maslin B14). But what exactly is this "raw nerve," and why does it matter? What is *Fight Club* saying about our contemporary historical and cultural moment, and why have audiences responded to it with such passion—both positive and negative? Moreover, how are we to adjudicate between such diametrically opposed interpretations of *Fight Club*: does it ultimately promote violent,

misogynistic fantasies that veer toward fascism, or does it imagine some alternative and politically progressive post-capitalist world?

While *Fight Club*'s supporters and detractors have both made insightful comments about the text, most critical commentary has relied on narrow and reductive critical assumptions that limit, rather than encourage, a more complete exploration of the text's complexity. Not only have critics focused almost exclusively on issues of gender and class identity, instead of engaging Palahniuk's much broader—and I will argue essentially existentialist—exploration of social alienation and the human condition, but they have also persisted in reading *Fight Club* as a relatively straightforward text instead of analyzing its more complex aesthetic strategies. Collapsing any kind of critical distance between Palahniuk's authorial perspective and the characters that he represents, critics have criticized *Fight Club* as if it simply and unproblematically advocated a return to the primordial masculinity and terrorist violence promoted by Palahniuk's anarchistic character, Tyler Durden. It is as if critics have forgotten both that *Fight Club* is narrated by a highly unreliable narrator—a radically alienated individual suffering from a wide range of psychological disorders—and that it employs diverse modernist, postmodernist, and other avant-garde aesthetic strategies. At the same time, *Fight Club*'s fans are equally guilty of reducing the text to a simplistic example of social satire, praising its critique of postmodern consumer capitalism without acknowledging the complex and problematic nature of its own self-reflexive criticism. *Fight Club* does satirize consumer capitalism, but Giroux correctly points out that its social and political critique is far from unproblematic. What is desperately needed at this critical juncture is a broader and more complex interpretive framework that will encourage less polarized and more nuanced interpretations of *Fight Club*.

In this paper, I argue that existentialism, both as a philosophical and as an aesthetic practice, provides a superior critical framework for interpreting *Fight Club*. While I am not suggesting that *Fight Club*'s representations of gender and class identity are either insignificant or unproblematic, I do believe that *Fight Club* engages issues of identity formation within a broader and more complex exploration of the human

condition that has more affinities with existentialism than it does with Marxist or feminist cultural criticism. Moreover, in arguing that existentialism provides a better framework for interpreting *Fight Club*, I am not suggesting that Palahniuk is either simply or exclusively an existentialist writer. Both Palahniuk in general and *Fight Club* in particular raise philosophical and aesthetic issues central to the existentialist tradition, but they often engage these issues in ways that differ from their existentialist predecessors. In fact, one of the hallmarks of both existentialist philosophy and existentialist literature has always been their stubborn refusal to articulate any singular or unified core doctrine. Given that existentialist discourse has always involved an ongoing exploration of contested and unresolved philosophical issues, it cannot be invoked simplistically to establish definitive or final solutions. If anything, I am advocating an "existentialist turn" in critical approaches to Palahniuk's literature because I believe that such an approach will open up, rather than close off, further critical discussion. In short, I believe that Palahniuk's does write within what can loosely be described as an existentialist literary tradition, but he does so with certain significant postmodern differences. The critical task of this paper, therefore, is to explore both how *Fight Club* engages existentialism and how it also subtly adapts existentialism to a new historical context in the age of postmodern capitalism.

At the most basic level, *Fight Club*'s fundamental premise of an alienated individual going underground to rage against a dehumanizing society is the direct literary descendent of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's proto-existentialist novella, *Notes From the Underground*. Like *Fight Club*, *Notes* is narrated by an unnamed narrator who is not only "sick" but derives perverse "enjoyment" from and "pride[s] himself on his diseases and even swagger[s] over them" (Dostoyevsky 1, 5, 4). Palahniuk's own unnamed narrator, who is conventionally referred to as Jack, also suffers from a wide range of vaguely defined psychological disorders—including both insomnia and narcolepsy, Dissociative Identity Disorder, suicidal and sociopathic tendencies, and insanity—and he seems to enjoy deliberately confronting sickness and death in all of its most hideous permutations. Even though Jack does nor personally suffer from any

physical illness, he attends a bewildering array of support groups for people with life-threatening diseases—including leukemia, tuberculosis, brain dementia, blood and brain parasites, and bowel and testicular cancer—because seeing "real pain" and listening to people whose "lives come down to nothing, and not even nothing, oblivion" helps him feel "more alive" (19, 17, 22). From the beginning to the end of the novel, Jack himself repeatedly confronts death and dismemberment as his alter-ego, Tyler Durden, sticks loaded guns in his mouth, drives him at recklessly high speeds into on-coming traffic, and threatens to castrate him—all to remind him that the "first step to eternal life is you have to die" (11). By the end of the novel, Jack's various psychological disorders ultimately fuse into full-blown insanity, landing him in a "white on white" room where people in "quiet, rubber-soled shoes" periodically deliver his "lunch tray and [his] meds" (206, 208).

Despite the fact that these confrontations with pain, illness, and death recur throughout the novel, critics have not successfully incorporated them into their relatively straightforward interpretations of *Fight Club* as either a realist or a satirical text. After all, if *Fight Club* is no more than a "defense of authoritarian masculinity wedded to the immediacy of pleasure sustained through violence and abuse" (Giroux 12), then why do Palahniuk and Fincher expend so much energy depicting male subjects not only in, but actually enjoying, various states of psychological and physical crisis? Giroux repeatedly complains that *Fight Club* "lacks a language for translating private troubles into public rage" and that it depicts a Darwinian/Hobbesian world in which "survival of the fittest becomes the clarion call for legitimating dehumanizing forms of violence as a source of pleasure and sociality," but his criticism seems to miss the point that Jack and Tyler both find immense pleasure in their private troubles and turn to violence precisely because they find it humanizing rather than dehumanizing (12). Giroux specifically criticizes one scene in which Tyler encourages Jack to threaten the life of Raymond, a clerk working a minimum-wage, dead-end job at the all-night Korner Mart. Jack ultimately lets Raymond live but only after making Raymond promise that he will be motivated by this near-death experience to pursue his true desire of becoming a

veterinarian. Giroux criticizes this scene for promoting a "Just Do It" market ideology that assumes "individual initiative and the sheer force of will magically cancel out institutional constraints" (7).

While Giroux may not agree with the text on this point, Jack seems to employ violence here both to re-humanize his victim and to liberate him from the ideology of the market. Jack does not seek to instill "individual initiative" and "will" in Raymond so that he will achieve greater success in the capitalist economy, but rather he hopes to shock Raymond into some kind of existential crisis that will awaken him to a deeper sense of freedom. In fact, it is precisely because Jack and Tyler are aware of the profound and dehumanizing strength of "institutional constraints" that they believe that Raymond can only recover his authentic individual freedom through an existential confrontation with death. What Jack seeks both to experience himself and to help others experience by confronting sickness, death, and nothingness is what Kierkegaard describes as "dread" or the "possibility of freedom" (252). In a passage from *Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard describes how this existential:

> dread of possibility holds man as its prey, until it can deliver him into the hands of faith. In no other place does he find repose, for every other point of rest is mere nonsense, even though in men's eyes it is shrewdness. This is the reason why possibility is so absolutely educative. No man has ever become so unfortunate in reality that there was not some little residue left to him, and, as common sense observes quite truly, if a man is canny, he will find a way. (255).

While this existentialist notion of a dread-induced "possibility of freedom" is not itself altogether unproblematic, it does a better job of describing the kind of existentialist pedagogy depicted in the Raymond scene than Giroux's reduction of this scene to merely a "privatized version of agency . . . emblematic of the very market forces [Jack] denounces" (6-7). One can still criticize this existentialist reading of the text, even for bearing traces of the same fascist politics and

hypermasculinity that Giroux himself criticizes, but such a critique would involve much more than simply dismissing it as little more than a Nike ad.

Within such an existentialist context, *Fight Club*'s recurring explorations of suffering, death, nothingness, and absurdity take on a very different meaning that makes these themes more integral than tangential elements of the text. As Walter Kaufmann explains in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, a "striking preoccupation with failure, dread, and death" can be seen as "one of the essential characteristics of existentialism," extending from Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* to Camus's philosophical analysis of suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (22). Recontextualizing *Fight Club* within this existentialist tradition, I believe that its recurring references to sickness and death are best understood as an exploration of how existentialist dread can help foster a more authentic sense of human freedom, such as Kierkegarrd's sense of the possibility of freedom, the Sartrean for-itself, or Camus's depiction of Sisyphus's heroic response to absurdity. When Jack describes the "cold tip of the knife" that is about to castrate him, he does not depict it as a moment of either dehumanizing or hypermasculine violence, but rather he invokes the surprisingly humanizing—and either feminized or homoeroticized—imagery of "arms wrapped around your chest. Therapeutic physical contact. Hug time. And the ether presses your nose and mouth, hard. Then nothing, less than nothing. Oblivion" (191). I find it hard to believe that a text single-mindedly obsessed with recuperating some sense of lost masculinity would depict castration as "therapeutic physical contact" and "hug time." Moreover, the ultimate telos of this scene focuses not on emasculation per se, but rather passes through castration anxiety to a deeper existential confrontation with "oblivion" or "nothingness" intended to shake Jack out of, not reinforce, his hypermasculine capitalist individualism and help him replace it with a more Sartrean sense of Being "for-itself . . . defined ontologically as a *lack of being*" (722). While Giroux is correct that *Fight Club* endlessly circles around issues of individual freedom, it does so within an existentialist tradition that believes "freedom is really synonymous with lack" (722).

In particular, Palahniuk and Dostoyevsky use this existentialist sense of dread-inspired freedom to critique how "modern man's obsession with materialistic progress" helps foster an alienating "eagerness to relinquish the burden of his freedom to the collectivist state in return for the comforts and security of the easy life," an existentialist theme that Spanos traces back to Dostoyevsky's *Notes From the Underground* (Spanos 4). As the Underground Man explains, even if one could "shower upon [man] every earthly blessing, drown him in a sea of happiness, so that nothing but bubbles of bliss can be seen on the surface, give him economic prosperity, such that he should have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes and busy himself with the continuation of his species, even then out of sheer ingratitude, sheer spite, man would play you some nasty trick" (21). Far from being simply acts of masculine bravado or even a revolutionary assault on capitalism, the nasty tricks played by Jack and Tyler—from the splicing of pornography into family films and guerilla waitering to the fighting, soap making, and terrorist mayhem—are perhaps better understood within this existentialist tradition as attempts to reclaim human beings' "burden of freedom" in a world that has succumbed to the easy IKEA comforts of Danish modernist furniture. Upon realizing that he has expended his "whole life to buy this stuff," with the end result that he has become "trapped in [his] lovely nest" where the "things you used to own, now they own you," Jack decides that he must blow up his upscale high-rise condo to escape from a consumer-oriented world where we:

> all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern. . . the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper . . . [and] the Vild hall clock made of galvanized steel (43-4).

However, when Jack prays, "May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect. Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete," he is neither attempting to overthrow capitalism nor institute a Marxist utopia (46). Rather, his desire for discontentment, imperfection, and incompleteness rejects both Marxist and capitalist

utopianism, opting instead for a more existential confrontation with the "burden of freedom," nothingness, and absurdity.

In addition, both *Notes* and *Fight Club* use existentialist motifs to explore what Spanos describes as existentialism's project of asserting the "agonizingly difficult authentic existence of the individual who insists upon maintaining his unique consciousness" in the face of "the institutionalized and collectivized life on the analogy of the machinery of technology toward which the modern world is drifting" (2). Criticizing the dehumanizing effects of instrumental reason, Dostoyevsky's Underground Man rejects any worldview that "transform[s] . . . a human being into an organ-stop or something of the sort" by attempting to tabulate all "human actions . . . according to these laws, mathematically, like tables of logarithms up to 108,000, and entered into an index; or, better still, there would be published certain edifying works of the nature of encyclopedic lexicons, in which everything will be so clearly calculated and explained that there will be no more incidents or adventures in the world" (17-18). Working as a recall campaign coordinator for an insurance company, Jack also complains about how his job requires him to reduce human life to mere mechanical "formula[s]," "simple arithmetic," and "story problem[s]":

> If a new car built by my company leaves Chicago traveling west at 60 miles an hour, and the rear differential locks up, and the car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside, does my company initiate a recall? You take the population of vehicles in the field (*A*) and multiply it by the probate rate of failure (*B*), then multiply the result by the average cost of our out-of-court settlement (*C*). *A* times *B* times *C* equals *X*. This is what it will cost if we don't initiate a recall. If *X* is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt. If *X* is less than the cost of a recall, then we don't recall. (30)

In a brilliant illustration of Camus's sense of the novel as "philosophy made into images," Jack's description of his work as a recall campaign

coordinator perfectly illustrates Heidegger's critique of the dehumanizing effects of a world in which "representational-calculative thinking becomes dominant" because philosophical thinking has been reduced to its "cybernetic, that is, technological character" (377, 376).

While many other modernist literary movements have produced similar critiques of both the complacent comforts of consumer capitalism and the dehumanizing effects of instrumental reason, what places both *Fight Club* and *Notes* within a specifically existentialist, as opposed to a more generically modernist, literary tradition is their repeated insistence that these problems are best confronted not by advancing some new political agenda, let alone some new artistic revolution, but rather through a more radical philosophical engagement with the existential contingencies of the human condition. When critics try to read *Fight Club* or *Notes* as simply some new political manifesto, they legitimately find fault with the contradictory and problematic positions advocated by their "sick" narrators, but Kaufmann and others have warned us against such simplistic readings of existentialist texts. Just as it would be a mistake to attribute to Dostoyevsky "the opinions of all of his characters," Palahniuk's existential explorations cannot be reduced to Tyler Durden's attempt to establish fight clubs or blow up corporate skyscrapers (Kaufmann 14). Against the backdrop of a rapidly expanding capitalist economy that alienates individuals by promoting narrowly defined notions of instrumental reason and material comfort, *Fight Club* should be read less as some kind of misguided self help-book for men trying to figure out how to reclaim their lost masculinity, let alone as an anarcho-terrorist political manifesto, than as a work of existentialist literature that explores how various existential confrontations with illness, death, absurdity, nothingness, and even violence—both in life and in art—might open up new possibilities for human freedom by deconstructing modernity's illusory and alienating metanarratives of techno-rational and materialistic progress.

Ultimately, the central premise of both *Notes* and *Fight Club* is that individuals can only become free by rejecting both "the laws of nature and the rational organization of happiness" in order to radically confront the "implacable and terrible truth" of existentialist philosophy: that if

"there are no laws to one's nature—and there cannot be if one is to be free—then man alone is his own law" because there are "no 'ideas' apart from the men who carry them. An idea for Doystoevsky is always someone's idea, and reason is always someone's reasoning" (Wasiolek 411-12). As the Underground Man declares, what "man wants is simply *independent* choice, whatever that independence may cost and wherever it may lead":

> man everywhere and at all times, whoever he may be, has preferred to act as he chose and not in the least as his reason and advantage dictated. And one may chose what is contrary to one's own interests, and sometimes one *positively ought* (that is my idea). One's own free unfettered choice, one's own caprice, however wild it may be, one's own fancy worked up at times to frenzy—is that very "most advantageous advantage" which we have overlooked, which comes under no classification and against which all systems and theories are continually being shattered to atoms. (17)

And what Dostoyevsky's *Notes* gives us is precisely that: the "drama of the mind that is sufficient to itself," the previously "unheard-of song of songs on individuality: not classical, not Biblical, and not at all romantic. No individuality is not retouched, idealized, or holy; it is wretched and revolting, and yet, for all its misery, the highest good" (Kaufmann 12).

In a similar vein, *Fight Club* also attempts to peel back the many facades of our postmodern consumer society to see if we might be able to recover some deeply buried existential self. Palahniuk's psychologically unstable narrator, Jack-Tyler, is no more an anti-capitalist hero (as *Fight Club*'s fans would have it), than he is some kind of covert capitalist, misogynistic villain (as *Fight Club*'s critics claim), but rather he is a postmodern existentialist who wants to deconstruct the metanarratives of modernity until he can reach some deeper level of existence that precedes essence. At the end of *Fight Club*, when Jack ultimately confronts God "across his long walnut desk with his diplomas hanging on the wall," he criticizes God for getting it "all wrong" (207):

> We are not special.
> We are not crap, either.
> We just are.
> We just are, and what happens just happens.
> And God says, "No that's not right."
> Yeah. Well. Whatever. You can't teach God anything. (207)

While Jack-Tyler is strongly tempted to remain in the metaphysical empyrean of heaven, where the gods of capitalism, modernity, and Christianity seduce him with illusions of metaphysical and materialistic perfection, he ultimately sees through these false promises of "sleep" or becoming a "hero" in a world where "each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of specific unique specialness" (206-7). Palahniuk's narrator, Jack-Tyler, prefers instead to reduce the human condition to its most basic, undefined radical confrontation with existence, fully exposed to Nietzsche's "total horror of a universe without truth or principle, good or evil, virtue or vice," a place where we "just are" and "what happens just happens" (Wasiolek 412; Palahniuk 207).

While recontextualizing *Fight Club* within the tradition of existentialist philosophy and literature can help explain certain aspects of this text that critics have found problematic, we are still faced with the critical conundrum of why critics have failed to recognize *Fight Club*'s seemingly obvious, if not over-the-top, exploration of existentialist themes. From its intense fascination with suicide and recurring explorations of existentialist angst to its deconstruction of instrumental reason and consumer capitalism and constant joking about the Death of God, *Fight Club* is a text that all-but begs to be read as an existentialist novel. Then why have critics repeatedly failed to do so? Perhaps the simplest explanation is that existentialism is currently out of academic fashion, so many critics may be ill-prepared to recognize it even if it hit them over the head. Instead, they tend to interpret *Fight Club* through the same postmodern, Marxist, feminist, and queer critical perspectives that they apply to other texts and have consequently focused on a different

set of critical issues generally focused around issues of gender and class identity.

At a deeper level, however, I believe that critics have also missed *Fight Club*'s engagement with existentialism because Palahniuk subtly disguises and transforms existentialism in ways that make it difficult to detect. Moreover, this difficulty is only further compounded in the case of Fincher's film which inevitably simplifies and erases some of the more existentialist dimensions of Palahniuk's novel. In particular, Palahniuk's novel transforms existentialism in two principal ways that have made it less obvious to most critics. First, Palahniuk adopts a pre-, proto-, or para-existentialist tone that resembles the work of early and marginal existentialist writers, such as Nietzsche, Rilke, and Beckett, much more than it resembles the work of central canonical existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre. Staying far away from the dense philosophical terminology and serious gravitas of High Existentialism, Palahniuk employs a more comical and earthy Nietzschean style that finds moments of philosophical significance in the least likely places. Instead of defining his sense of existentialism through technical exegesis of weighty classical and Biblical texts—like the myth of Sisyphus or the story of Abraham's sacrifice—Palahniuk is more likely to humorously explore the existential possibilities inherent in contemporary, postmodern artifacts, such as "IKEA furniture catalogue[s]," "collagen trust funds," and "planet Denny's, the orange planet" (43, 91, 171). In this more popular, low-brow, postmodern style, the difference between Palahniuk's and Sartre's sense of existentialism can be as vast as the difference between e.e. cummings's and T. S. Eliot's different approaches to modernism.

Moreover, by writing closer to the margins than the center of the existentialist tradition, Palahniuk runs the risk of losing touch with the themes that provide his novel with so much of its philosophical and creative energy. If Palahniuk feels more comfortable on the existentialist fringe, doesn't this suggest the he might be only a reluctant, agnostic, or perhaps even outright skeptical existentialist. While *Fight Club* clearly engages a wide range of existential themes, it does so with a sense of postmodern ironic detachment that veers dangerously close to

existentialist self-parody. Unlike Camus's *The Stranger*, whose narrator unapologetically commits an act of cold-blooded murder, or his *Myth of Sisyphus*, which explicitly defines a kind of ideal absurdist hero, Palahniuk's narrator seems to lack the conviction of a true hero and attempts to shut down Project Mayhem as soon as someone actually dies because he had intended for it to only be about a "fun let's-pretend sort of death" (196). At best, Palahniuk and his characters seem to be only ambivalent existentialists, playing with the existential possibilities of dread, freedom, and being, without taking them too seriously. While they are genuinely fascinated by the allure of the abyss, they are generally reluctant to pull any triggers or take any bullets for philosophy or Dasein. They may be forced to confront the possibility of having the "best part of [themselves] frozen in a sandwich bag at the Paper Street Soap Company," but they typically return home only "scarred but [still] intact" (166). At worst, Palahniuk's ironic detachment disintegrates into a kind of existentialist parody that simultaneously satirizes both the alienated consumers who "sit in the bathrooms with their IKEA furniture catalogue" and the "space monkeys in the Mischief Committee of Project Mayhem" who are "running wild, destroying every scrap of history" (43, 12). It is as if after having proclaimed the Death of God, Palahniuk realizes that the existentialist absurd hero itself may be next. For me, the brilliance of Palahniuk's novel is that it strikes a precarious balance somewhere between an ambivalent existentialism and existentialist parody, engaging existentialism without either taking it too seriously or dismissing it altogether.

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Diagnosing Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

Peter Mathews

The great strength of the totalitarian state is that it forces those who fear it to imitate it.

- Adolph Hitler

Whether analyzing the book or the film, the critical responses to Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) have been sharply divided. While Joan Evans and Blyle Frank praise it for daring to explore the paradoxes of contemporary identity politics, the negative tone against Palahniuk's debut work has largely sprung from the criticism of Henry Giroux. Giroux argues that in spite of its apparently subversive politics, *Fight Club* ends up affirming the same set of values it seems to condemn. He writes: "Ostensibly, *Fight Club* appears to offer a critique of late capitalist society and the misfortunes it generates out of its obsessive concern with profits, consumption, and the commercial values that underlie its market-driven ethos. However, *Fight Club* is less interested in attacking the broader material relations of power and strategies of domination and exploitation associated with neoliberal capitalism than it is in rebelling against a consumerist culture that dissolves the bonds of male sociality and puts into place an enervating notion of male identity and agency" (5). For Giroux, then, *Fight Club* eschews the alienating effects of capitalism by regressing to something even worse: a cynical, male brotherhood that glorifies violence over "engaged political commentary" as the final solution to society's problems (6). Palahniuk's work, he argues, is the symptom of a contemporary "culture of cynicism," a recent trend in American culture that is the ongoing heritage of such predecessors as Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1989) (6). In her article, Suzanne Clark attempts to soften the sharper edges of Giroux's claims, but ultimately decides that "Giroux is correct – that [...] [*Fight Club*]simply underscores an increasingly dangerous

antipathy to any public order" (418). Thomas Peele, by contrast, is ambivalent about the value of *Fight Club*, and tries to balance unreconciled claims that Palahniuk's work "teaches misogyny" and "heteronormativity" while praising its "queer representations" (862-3). Mark Pettus's reading dismisses the novel as a whole on the grounds that Tyler's revolutionary status as a charade designed to affirm the neo-fascist ideas underlying Project Mayhem. "Project Mayhem succeeds not only in reproducing itself," he writes, "but also in reproducing the dominant system it opposes" (125). For Pettus, Palahniuk's appropriation of revolutionary discourse is all the more a betrayal because of its hidden conservative agenda. Nonetheless, Palahniuk has also been criticized in other quarters as "anti-capitalist, […] anti-society and, indeed, anti-God" (Alexander Walker qtd. in Remlinger 141). The bulk of the criticism has thus centered on whether Tyler Durden is a positive or negative role model, particularly in the light of the political statements that issue from his mouth.[1]

But this widespread assumption makes for poor literary criticism: Tyler Durden does not speak directly for Palahniuk any more than Heathcliff is the mouthpiece of Emily Brontë. Nor can *Fight Club* simply be reduced to a label, because its underlying project is to critique the totalitarian logic that underlies *both* sides of conventional politics. So while Tyler appears to be a revolutionary character, this status must be measured against the false depoliticization of everyday life that characterizes the narrator's world, as captured in the description of his apartment:

> Home was a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals. The marketing brochure promised a foot of concrete floor, ceiling, and wall between me and any

[1]In his article, for example, Geoffrey Sirc sees Fight Club as a problematic text, but argues that nonetheless it connects with other subversive cultural figures such as Eminem and Chris Burden, the "real Tyler Durdens of our culture" (432).

> adjacent stereo or turned-up television. A foot of concrete and air conditioning, you couldn't open the windows so even with maple flooring and dimmer switches, all seventeen hundred airtight feet would smell like the last meal you cooked or your last trip to the bathroom. (Palahniuk 41).

Squeezed into a space designed to inhibit rather than enhance communication, the narrator lives a life that is mostly devoid of real, unscripted choices. Palahniuk depicts a recurring mainstream pattern of passive consumption in which life is lived out as a narrow set of default options. Whatever the narrator's political views, the majority of his ethical choices are governed by economic necessity: where he lives, the food he buys, the job at which he works, and so on. The kind of "engaged political commentary" that Giroux envisions is as impossible and useless as the narrator attempting to open one of his windows. The narrator's world consists of a series of profane exchanges conditioned by the almost (but not quite, as it turns out) irresistible force of financial power, a world reduced to a series of formulae, from how to decorate one's apartment to the cost of a human life. "You take the population of vehicles in the field (*A*) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (*B*), then multiply the result by the average cost of an out-of-court settlement (*C*). […] If *X* is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt. If *X* is less than the cost of a recall, then we don't recall" (30).

At the end of his article on *Fight Club*, Slavoj Žižek points to the work of the French philosopher Georges Bataille. In Palahniuk's work, he argues, "we effectively get a kind of Bataillean 'unrestrained expenditure' – the pious desire to […] have a revolution without a revolution" (124). Geoffrey Sirc also makes a similar comparison: "Dying for an exuberant life, an excessive life, any sort of 'near-life experience'? That could be Georges Bataille's story" (425). While neither Žižek nor Sirc explore the connection to Bataille in any depth, the connection is a

suggestive one, for it points cannily to a broader set of discourses in Palahniuk's text. *Fight Club* is more than a superficial commentary on postmodern consumerism and identity politics in the same way that Bataille's *Story of the Eye* (1928) is more than an ecstatic proclamation of sexual liberation. With their overwhelming focus on identity politics, the critics have generally failed to address the novel's existential meditation on religion, economics, and politics. Only Stefanie Remlinger, for example, has foregrounded the religious dimensions of the text:

> [C]omplaining, as the men do, about God seemingly having left them – as did their fathers, their 'models of God' – is not the same as being 'anti-God' or atheist. In fact, the […] [work] is suffused with religious metaphor alluding to the Christian topos of purposeful, redeeming violence and the connection of (self-)sacrifice, resurrection and the coming of a better world – after the apocalyptic Flood of violence they are trying to turn loose. (151-2)

Remlinger's comments are part of her closing thoughts rather than a fully developed argument, but what distinguishes her work from most other critics is her willingness to engage in a historically informed discussion of Palahniuk's work. Fight Club's critique, after all, is not restricted to the "postmodern" world, but repeatedly points back both to the foundations of modernity (to such events as the French Revolution) and even further into the past, to ancient religious ceremonies and rituals (such as human sacrifice). To interpret Fight Club, as Giroux and his followers do, as a veiled conservative reaction against the contemporary identity politics of the post-feminist, late capitalist era is both simplistic and shortsighted.

Bataille's work intersects with Palahniuk's novel at many levels, in particular the way it engages economics and religion in order to work out a political critique. In his writings Bataille, a

renegade associate of the surrealists, creates a complicated synthesis of Marx and Freud by way of Nietzsche. Bataille breaks down the barriers, for instance, between the material world of economics and the virtual mechanics of the libido, seeing them as interlocking modes of the same process. Like Nietzsche, Bataille is an atheist, but the notion of the sacred is central to his work. In his essay "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," Bataille argues that the world is divided between two economic modes, the homogenous and the heterogeneous. The homogeneous relates to the world of profane production and exchange, and it is this relation that produces the social order. "According to the judgment of *homogenous* society, each man is worth what he produces; in other words, he stops being an existence *for itself*: he is no more than a function, arranged within measurable limits, of collective production (which makes him an existence *for something other than itself*)" (Bataille 138). He supplements this classical Marxist analysis with the notion of the heterogeneous, a category that comprehends everything outside the usual boundaries of exchange. This category involves two extremes: the sanctified objects of religion (the Communion chalice, for instance, is set aside for its ritual function only) and things deemed by society to be taboo or abject (human waste, for instance). "The exclusion of *heterogeneous* elements from the *homogeneous* realm of consciousness formally recalls the exclusion of the element, described by (by psychoanalysis) as *unconscious* […] Just as, in religious sociology, *mana* and *taboo* designate forms restricted to the particular applications of a more general form, the *sacred*, so may the *sacred* itself be considered as a restricted form of the *heterogeneous*" (141). Broadly defined, therefore, the sacred is made up of those elements in society, whether holy or abject, that fall outside the general economy of exchange. The sacred is an expenditure that has no utilitarian purpose.

Bataille's analysis provides a potent tool for understanding Palahniuk's critique of contemporary culture. The narrator of *Fight Club* moves through a largely secular world in which the

traditional notions of the sacred have been colonized by the workings of the homogeneous economy. This phenomenon is demonstrated by the disenchantment of the sexual taboo throughout the novel. The narrator notes, for instance, the way in which consumer goods have replaced pornography: "The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue" (Palahniuk 43). This change occurs not because humanity has become more "rational" – the fetishized consumer object is in many ways more irrational and perverse than its sexual precursor – but because pornography, as the homogeneous appropriation of the sexual taboo, has finally lost its heterogeneous aura. Palahniuk shows us a world in which capitalism actively seeks out the sacred in order to exploit the surplus energy that underlies such objects. The sexual taboo has been mined for this potential in every way imaginable, from pornography to such phallic substitutes as the pink dildo in Marla's apartment. "Don't be afraid," she says. "It's not a threat to you" (61). The impingement of the general economy brings with it the alienation Marx associates with economic exchange. This movement results in a feeling of powerlessness, and Palahniuk symbolizes his narrator's impotence through a series of de-eroticized encounters – searching Marla's breast for a tumor, for instance, or the specter of castration that looms over the testicular cancer victims. Events that once might have been taboo have almost been drained of their sacred aura.

While sexuality seems to have lost much of its taboo energy by being appropriated into the general economy, that does not mean the sacred has disappeared altogether from the postmodern world. Cultural change in one area leads not only to the disenchantment of the old symbols of the sacred, but also to the creation of new forms of taboo. Palahniuk shows his readers a world in flux, and throughout the novel the metaphor of the hand is used to symbolize this transition. Žižek, for example, writes:

> [T]he self-beating begins with the hero's hand acquiring a life of its own, escaping the hero's control – in short, turning into a partial object […] This provides the key to the figure of the double with whom [...] the hero is fighting; the double, the hero's Ideal Ego, a spectral/invisible hallucinatory entity, is not simply external to the hero – its efficiency is inscribed within the hero's body itself as the autonomization of one of its organs (the hand). The hand acting on its own is the drive ignoring the dialectic of the subject's desire: drive is fundamentally the insistence of an undead "organ without a body," standing, like Lacan's *lamella*, for that which the subject had to lose in order to subjectivize itself in the symbolic space of sexual difference. (113)

While Žižek is right in pointing to the hand as an instrument of alienation, as the Ideal Ego that enforces, within the subject, the social hierarchy of the homogeneous economy, he is only partially right. The hand remains an ambivalent symbol throughout the novel, at once a signifier of production (the hand as a tool) and anti-production (the hand as a weapon).

The symbol of the hand is introduced in the scene where the narrator first meets Tyler. Pulling driftwood out of the ocean, the naked Tyler draws a symbolic line in the sand and arranges the logs into a peculiar structure. "What Tyler had created was the shadow of a giant hand. Only now the fingers were Nosferatu-long and the thumb was too short, but he said how at exactly four-thirty the hand was perfect. The giant shadow hand was perfect for one minute, and for one perfect minute Tyler had sat in the palm of a perfection he'd created for himself" (Palahniuk 33). This crucial scene has multiple resonances – it might be read as a religious allegory, for example, in which humanity, through the prophet Tyler, the new Moses, has received a new set of commandments written directly by the hand of God. Alternatively, the hand's shadow may be an allusion to the opening lines of *The Communist*

Manifesto (1848): "A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism" (Marx and Engels 2). But the strongest connection is to Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), to a famous passage in which Smith states that "every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. […] [B]y direction that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention" (365). Smith's celebrated metaphor of the "invisible hand" has not only been a favorite amongst the champions of capitalism, but the disjunction in this passage between individual intention and social impact provides a distorted echo of the identity crisis at the center of *Fight Club*'s plot.

Because of the hand's ambivalent function, its dual ability to serve both the heterogeneous and the homogeneous, it becomes a key symbol in the emerging struggle between the narrator and Tyler. The floating significance of the metaphor actually divides the novel into two distinct arcs. In both of these arcs, the hand is anti-productive: its central purpose is to tear down and destroy. But this destructive energy changes at a crucial moment, in the scene at the end of Chapter 8 when Tyler pours lye over the narrator's hand. Until this point, the narrator's awakening from his late capitalist malaise is largely affirmative. In a world characterized by profanity, the narrator gradually rediscovers the sacred by engaging increasingly in acts of useless expenditure. In the early chapters of the novel, Palahniuk traces the displacement of religious sentiment in contemporary culture. The narrator finds solace from his insomnia, for example, by visiting support groups. Not only does this communal act go against the rigid segregation exemplified by his apartment complex, but the groups also meet in the basement of churches, signaling their status as religious supplements. The apparently secular activities of these support groups reproduce the heterogeneous function for a society in which true religious devotion has largely disappeared. Furthermore, the

people meeting in these groups are the abject, the failed byproduct of a consumer society. They are, as the desperate Chloe demonstrates, "untouchable" – the cancerous, the castrated, they are those who have lost all productive purpose in life through the intervention of sickness or addiction.

Within the logic of Bataille's philosophy, therefore, it is understandable that the narrator finds an initial avenue into the sacred through the support groups. The narrator is able to identify with the people in these groups precisely because they are part of the heterogeneous. Their physical shortcomings reflect his own feelings of spiritual emptiness, and thus the groups become a release mechanism for his frustrated religious energy. Palahniuk writes:

> Bob's big arms were closed around to hold me inside, and I was squeezed into the dark between Bob's new sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God's as big. […] I've been coming here every week for two years, and every week Bob warps his arms around me, and I cry. (16-17)

The connection to the sacred is explicit: held in Bob's/God's arms (recalling the popular Christian song "He's got the whole world in his hands") the narrator cries out his emotional frustration. This pent-up energy is all he has to bring: once it is expended, he is nothing and nobody, able to fall easily into the void of sleep. By introducing the narrator to the heterogeneous, the support groups lay the psychological foundation for fight club.

The intrusion of Marla into this picture ruins the effectiveness of the support groups. She disturbs this economy not because she is a woman, but because she provides a witness, a gaze to judge the narrator's actions. Before Marla's arrival, his performance was, to use Bataille's term, "for itself" – the narrator could forget that he was merely performing his sadness because the Other he confronted was silent, anonymous, and ultimately malleable to his

own illusions. Marla's gaze transforms the narrator into an "in itself," a faker who is all too aware of the distance between her perception and his reality:

> To Marla I'm a fake. […] In this one moment, Marla's lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies. In the middle of all their truth. Everyone clinging and risking to share their worst fear, that their death is coming head-on and the barrel of a gun is pressed against the back of their throats. Well, Marla is smoking and rolling her eyes, and me, I'm buried under a sobbing carpet, and all of a sudden even death and dying rank right down there with plastic flowers on video as a non-event. (23)

The ambiguity of Marla's gaze is that while it disempowers the narrator, it nonetheless turns against itself, denying even its own authority. Marla does not set herself up as a new law, as Tyler later attempts to do. She is a purely destructive force with the power to melt the ice of bad faith that surrounds both herself and others. That she is a woman only disturbs the narrator in the context of the testicular cancer support group. Her presence there *cannot* be authentic, making her complacent lack of pretense a grotesque parody of his own earnest fakeness. The attraction of Marla lies in her heterogeneous, negative force, exemplified by her morbid desire to "have Tyler's abortion" (59).

In terms of plot structure, it is no accident that the narrator first meets Marla immediately after his initial encounter with Tyler at the beach. Palahniuk obviously intends for the reader to compare these two characters, to examine the differences between their overall approach to negativity. Marla has a fascination for total destruction, a pure form of nihilism. Tyler, by contrast, destroys for the sake of a future production. For Bataille, this peculiar twist on the intertwining economies of the sacred and the profane gives rise to a new and distinctly different political form: fascism. The

logic of fascism inverts the traditional relationship between master and slave. Bataille writes: "If the heterogeneous nature of the slave is akin to that of the filth in which his material situation condemns him to live, that of the master is formed by an act excluding all filth: an act pure in direction but sadistic in form" (146). Fascism, by contrast, plays on the heterogeneous power of the lower classes. It recognizes that the ruling classes, after the fall of the aristocracy, rely on the lower classes more than ever in order to construct their identity. Tyler declaims: "The people you're trying to step on, we're everyone you depend on. We're the people who do your laundry and cook your food and serve you dinner. […] We control every part of your life. We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rocks stars, but we won't. And we're just learning this fact. […] So don't fuck with us" (Palahniuk 166). Posing as a champion of the lower classes, Tyler Durden is able to draw on the energy and imperative power of the heterogeneous while simultaneously negating its potential for revolution.

Fascism, according to Bataille, draws its power from combining two key discourses: religion and militarism. Fascism is able to play off these forces against each other to create a new and powerful political tool. This two-part process involves, first of all, an awakening of the heterogeneous, a release of communal energy. Those aroused by this movement feel liberated by it, and this sentiment informs the initial arc of *Fight Club*. Until the end of Chapter 8, the reader witnesses a subliminal religious revival in the narrator. This process begins with the visits to the support groups, but escalates with the entrance of Tyler, from the discovery of the demolished apartment to the establishment of fight club. Palahniuk accordingly peppers this section of the novel with religious motifs. When the narrator phones Tyler for the first time, for example, his thoughts are rendered as a caricature of the Lord's Prayer:

> Oh, Tyler, please deliver me.
> […]

> Oh, Tyler, please rescue me.
> […]
> Deliver me from Swedish furniture.
> Deliver me from clever art.
> […]
> May I never be complete.
> May I never be content.
> May I never be perfect.
> Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete. (46)

Although Tyler's messianic aspirations remain veiled at this stage, the ongoing release of heterogeneous energy picks up from this point. The narrator moves into the Paper Street house, eschewing his yuppie lifestyle; his productivity at work slips until his climactic confrontation with his boss; and he stops attending the support groups in order to set up fight club. The narrator's attitude throughout this section reflects Marla's, a pure negativity without a specified goal or purpose. Like Alice descending into Wonderland, the narrator allows himself to fall ever further into the realm of the heterogeneous. At the same time, his initial Christian language is supplanted by echoes of Buddhism. "HELLO! I am so ZEN. This is BLOOD. This is NOTHING. Hello. Everything is nothing, and it's so cool to be ENLIGHTENED. Like me" (64). There is no god, no savior, no father-figure, no heaven, no goal whatsoever for which to head. "There's hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved. […] There's nothing personal about who you fight in fight club. You fight to fight" (51-4). Fight club becomes the new religion without religion.

Fight club reaffirms the anonymity, the loss of self that the narrator first encounters at the support groups, and Palahniuk makes various subtle comparisons between the two experiences. At the testicular cancer group, for instance, the narrator describes seeing the impression of his face on Bob's shirt: "[W]hen I stepped

away from his soft chest, the front of Bob's shirt was a wet mask of how I looked crying" (22). Similarly, when he goes to fight club: "[M]y was swollen shut and was bleeding, and after I said, stop, I could look down and there was a print of half my face in blood on the floor" (51). Instead of a full mask, as he had seen at the support group, the narrator sees only half of his face in the bloody impression. Already the left hand, it seems, does not know what the right hand is doing. The success of fascism, as evidenced by the figure of Tyler, comes from sharing many of the revolutionary views of the left. Fascism is not, as numerous political thinkers have mistakenly assumed, a conservative doctrine, driven by a nostalgia for absolute rule.[2] Although it borrows from the mythology of the past, it does so in order to revolutionize by stealth rather than to conserve. Fascist ideology represents a secular return of the repressed, the reemergence of the heterogeneous in a world dominated by the bourgeois logic of utilitarian ideals. As Bataille points out: "Fascism's close ties with the impoverished classes profoundly distinguish this formation from classical royal society" (154). Uncovering the division between the heterogeneous and the homogeneous, Bataille shows the limits of classical Marxist analysis. By predicting a return, through communism, to unalienated labor, and branding religion as merely a tool of the ruling classes, Marx fails to account for humanity's religious instincts – even in a predominantly secular society.

The anti-establishment rants that characterize Tyler's discourse throughout *Fight Club* are not just a mimicry of the left – fascism and Marxism really do engage in a parallel critique of capitalism's limits.[3] Despite the obvious similarities of their core values, all the mainstream contemporary political discourses, including Marxism, have attempted to sequester fascism by emphasizing its dissimilarities. At the center of the bourgeois,

[2]See, for example, Zeev Sternhell's Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France.
[3] I am not claiming that Marxism and fascism are the same thing, far from it, but they share a common enemy: bourgeois capitalism.

secular ideology is a glorification of labor, a value that Marx himself preserves in his utopian vision of a liberated but hardworking communist society. It is against this glorification of the profane, of the homogeneous, productive economy that fascism sets itself. Hitler's party, it must not be forgotten, was a worker's party, the National Socialists. At one level, therefore, Palahniuk's three central characters could be interpreted as representing key political positions of the modern era. Their common starting point, a revolt against the homogeneous, initiates their attraction. What is particularly interesting, however, is the way in which this unity against a common enemy blinds both the narrator and Marla to Tyler's ulterior motives.

The incident at the end of Chapter 8, when Tyler pours lye over the narrator's hand, marks the beginning of the second arc of the novel, a turning point is subtly flagged by the text itself. The chemical burn on the narrator's hand is repeatedly compared to a "cigarette burn" (76), an intratextual reference to Tyler's job as a projectionist: "'Cigarette burns,' they're called in the business. The first white dot, this is the two minute-warning […] to warn you that a changeover is coming up" (27-8). Tyler transforms the narrator's hand from a purely destructive force, using the scar to appropriate it as a signifier. "This means something," Tyler tells him, "This is a sign" (77). The Alice-inspired metaphor of falling is thus revoked by Tyler – the narrator's task, in this moment of pain, is "to hit bottom" (76). The aimless release of heterogeneous energy is cunningly rechanneled into the service of a concealed political end. Although the narrator does not understand the meaning of this inscription, he begins to realize, from this moment on, that his liberation from the general economy is neither meaningless nor accidental.

The key to interpreting this scene lies in the pervasive allusions to religion. Palahniuk mixes together various references to the story of Christ's crucifixion, for instance. Tyler makes the narrator promise that he will never discuss their relationship with Marla. "Now remember, that was three times that you promised,"

Tyler warns him (72). This triple affirmation combines two events from the gospels – the apostle Peter's threefold denial of Christ during the night of the passion (John 18:15-27), and Peter's threefold affirmation of his love for the risen Christ (John 21:15-22). Palahniuk's compression of these two events into a single instance is not merely an act of narrative economy. The extremes of Peter's emotions (love, betrayal) are deliberately combined in order to underline the ambivalent fascination that the narrator – and by extension, the reader – feels towards Tyler. While the narrator recognizes this allure, he simultaneously refuses to acknowledge the gnawing doubt that accompanies it. The kiss on the narrator's hand, in a further biblical allusion, is a Judas kiss, a mark of betrayal on Tyler's part. Palahniuk again twists with the meaning of this allusion: it is not Tyler, the savior, who is betrayed, but rather the narrator, his disciple. Whereas the first arc of the novel examines the narrator's inchoate willingness to sacrifice himself, the second arc explores how Tyler exploits his personal allure, his heterogeneity, to sacrifice others. Tyler poses as a messianic figure who, like Christ, has come to save the world from its sins. But Christ himself possesses a double role, for while in his first incarnation he is the paschal lamb, the passive sacrifice to end all sacrifices, his promised return, prophesied in the book of Revelation, shows him coming back at the end of the world to judge rather than save.[4]

This recurring motif of sacrifice ties into fascism's characteristic obsession with cleanliness. This fixation points to the fundamental contradiction in its psychology, for the source of its power, paradoxically, lies in its ability to mobilize the

[4] The narrator says on more than one occasion: "That old saying, how you always kill the one you love, well, look, it works both ways" (Palahniuk 13). While this statement captures the narrator's general ambivalence, it is also an echo of Dostoevsky's novel Crime and Punishment. "'Everything cuts both ways; now everything cuts both ways,' repeated Raskolnikov to himself again and again" (Dostoevsky 344). Dostoevsky explores similar themes in that novel, such as the overlap between sacrifice and politics. His conflicted protagonist, Raskolnikov, claims initially that he killed the old woman because she was a "louse," a cancer that needed to be removed for the general health of society (418).

heterogeneous elements of society (the abject, the downtrodden, the untouchables).[5] The fascist project is therefore fundamentally nihilist, for its power and vision lies in a project of pure and revolutionary negation. The emerging goals of Project Mayhem, in particular Tyler's aim of eliminating all signs and memories of the past, are built on the elusive dream of a *tabula rasa*. "We wanted to blast the world free of history. […] Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world" (Palahniuk 125). Tyler instills in his followers the dream of recreating the Garden of Eden by wiping the slate clean at both a personal and a collective level. In order for this to happen, however, the old structures of the world have to be torn away – sacrificed, purified, cleansed. The images of soap that pervade the page of *Fight Club* are emblematic of this fascist ideal. "Soap and human sacrifice go hand in hand," says Tyler (75). As the lye burns into the narrator's hand, Tyler continues to explain:

> "In ancient history," Tyler says, "human sacrifices were made on a hill above a river." […] "Rain," Tyler says, "fell on the burnt pyre year after year, and year after year, people were burned, and the rain seeped through the wood ashes to become a solution of lye, and the lye combined with the melted fat of the sacrifices, and a thick white discharge of soap crept out from the base of the altar and crept downhill toward the river." […] Where the soap fell in the river, Tyler says, after a thousand years of killing people and rain, the ancient people found their clothes got cleaner if they washed at that spot. […] "It was right to kill all those people,"

[5]As well as Crime and Punishment, the link between obsessive cleanliness and fascist ideology has strong currency in contemporary literature and culture. In Martin Scorsese's film Taxi Driver, for instance, the protagonist's incipient fascism is accompanied by apocalyptic visions of floods that will wash the streets clean of their filth. Similarly, Toni Morrison's examination of the fascist mindset in The Bluest Eye is characterized by a neurotic obsession with cleanliness. When Pecola is raped by her father, for instance, she is symbolically washing dishes.

> Tyler says. […] "Without their death, their pain, without their sacrifice," Tyler says, "we would have nothing" (76-8)

This second Eden, therefore, is bought at the price of human lives, with the currency of blood. Palahniuk once again subtly connects Tyler to Judas, although Judas, unlike Tyler, throws away his thirty pieces of silver, his "blood money," after realizing the deed he committed to earn it far outweighed his monetary compensation.
The fascist interest in cleanliness thus expresses itself as a religious search for "purity," on the one hand, and as a medical dread of "infection" on the other. In *The Transparency of Evil* (1990), Jean Baudrillard looks at the way postmodern culture has unconsciously inherited this fascination with cleanliness and purity. While the overt historical forms of fascism (as expressed by Hitler, Mussolini, or Mosley) have either disappeared or been marginalized, this logic lives on in the ongoing expansion of what Baudrillard calls "prophylactic space":

> It is not absurd to suppose that the extermination of man begins with the extermination of man's germs. One has only to consider the human being himself, complete with his emotions, his passions, his laughter, his sex and his secretions, to conclude that man is nothing but a dirty little germ – an irrational virus marring a universe of transparency. Once has he has been purged, once everything has been cleaned up and all infection – whether of a social or a bacillary kind – has been driven out, then only the virus of sadness will remain in a mortally clean and mortally sophisticated world. (Baudrillard 61)

Within this discourse of purity, therefore, Tyler's tactics parallel the medical strategy of vaccination. His revolutionary actions have a subversive attraction to them: selling soap made from liposuction

fat to rich women; pissing in perfume bottles that supposedly contain ambergris; splicing frames of pornography into childrens' films; putting a gun to a store clerk's head and threatening to kill him if he doesn't return to his studies. "'The liberator who destroys my property,' Tyler said, 'is fighting to save my spirit. The teacher who clears all possessions from my path will set me free'" (Palahniuk 110). The purpose of vaccination, after all, is to introduce a weakened strain of a disease into the body. This is done not only in order to stimulate the body's immune system, but also to train it to *recognize* the disease's cell structure. Vaccination is thus a semantic, epistemological process designed to separate the self from the non-self. Society's institutions, argues Baudrillard, have been universally reprogrammed in accordance with this prophylactic framework.

In his book *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes puts forward the key metaphor of the "body politic," with the sovereign as the head and the various parts of the state as the remainder of the body, a symbolism ripe for this later medical discourse. Tyler is thus neither the first nor the last to launch a program of political "vaccination". Palahniuk makes several important references to the French Revolution, for instance. If the Terror represented the disease, the disintegration of the French political system, then to Tyler's eyes it is the dictatorship of Napoleon that provided the necessary "correction":

> "We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression.
>
> "We have to show these men and women freedom by enslaving them, and show them courage by frightening them.
>
> "Napoleon bragged that he could train men to sacrifice their lives for a scrap of ribbon." (149)

Tyler repeatedly identifies himself with such "corrective" figures, virtuous rebels who reform the system from the inside out, from Robin Hood to Jesus Christ to Napoleon. Using Project Mayhem, Tyler is able to slip past the defenses of society's institutions and run rampant in the undefended territories of its prophylactic space. Instead of war, the new political strategy is terrorism: "Tyler and me, we've turned into the guerrilla terrorists of the service industry" (81). Instead of strikes, the new form of economic protest is the computer virus: "Mischief and Misinformation Committees are racing each other to develop a computer virus that will make automated bank tellers sick enough to vomit storms of ten- and twenty-dollar bills" (145). The critical ingredient for fascism's success, if it is to return in the postmodern era, is simply that it not be recognized as such.

It is from this perspective that the issue of identity in *Fight Club* should be approached. There are two sides to this particular coin: first, there is the identity crisis that underpins the split between the narrator and Tyler; second, there are the discussions of identity construction and its politics within the boundaries of the novel. This latter category has been, for the most part, the source of the novel's controversy. The narrator's musings about his father in Chapter 6, combined with his troubled relationship with Marla and his implicitly homoerotic attachment to Tyler, have led to various (and rather confused) charges of misogyny and latent homophobia: "What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women. […] I'm a thirty-year-old boy, and I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer I need" (50-1). The meaning and importance of these statements cannot be taken at face value, but need to be interpreted in the context of the novel's broader themes. At the religious level, for instance, the disappearance of the father parallels the withdrawal of the traditional father-figure of God from the postmodern world. Similarly, the abolition of the authoritarian structures of aristocracy means that the king, traditionally referred to as the "father" of the

people, no longer holds power in today's society.[6] As a rule, power structures involving a centralized, authoritarian law-giver have been overthrown in the postmodern world – whether at the level of the state, religion, the family, or any other institution.

While these revolutions are liberatory to some extent, Palahniuk's thesis is that the decentralization of power hardly guarantees an end to tyranny. The French Revolution is a case in point, for while the idea of bourgeois freedom gained the upper hand with the storming of the Bastille, the actual implementation of this freedom proved to be more problematic, leading to such long and complicated detours as the Terror, Napoleon, the July Revolution, the 1848 Revolution, the tyrannical reign of Napoleon III, and so on. Throughout *Fight Club*, Palahniuk warns his readers not to lose sight of the inevitable disjunction that exists between an ideology and its material effects. As Tyler's success demonstrates, these discourses often provide effective screens for a fascist mindset, conscious or otherwise, on both sides of politics. Palahniuk shows how the transformation of a liberatory discourse into an ideological *doxa* ultimately alienates the very people it should be winning over. The recurring message of "thou shalt not" from progressive groups has the dangerous consequence of giving its opponents an inappropriate (but understandable) psychology of rebellion. The narrator's comments in Chapter 6 are framed by exactly this psychology: because of its newfound cultural authority, feminism has made it "daring" for him to express this potentially misogynist point of view.

The difficulty of diagnosing *Fight Club*'s place on the political continuum arises from its sophisticated critique of dividing complex political discourses according to this reductionist model. Underlying Palahniuk's work is a presupposition that the meanings of "left" and "right," "progressive" and "conservative" are historically relative.

[6] The extent to which Tyler's rants resemble Mussolini's writings is quite uncanny. On this particular subject, for example, Mussolini writes: "Democratic régimes may be described as those under which the people are, from time to time, deluded into the belief that they exercise sovereignty, while all the time real sovereignty resides in and is exercised by other and sometimes irresponsible and secret forces. Democracy is a kingless régime infested by many kings who are sometimes more exclusive, tyrannical, and destructive than one, even if he is a tyrant" (21-2).

The novel demonstrates that the defining feature of politics, from Christ to today, is that the most authoritarian institutions have, without exception, originated from a movement that, in its original manifestation, was identifiably revolutionary and left-wing. It is for this reason that blind trust should not be placed in the forces of today's progressive movements, from feminism to anti-globalization to gay liberation to veganism. Each of these discourses claims to be a vaccination against the various fascisms of postmodernity. But this inoculation may backfire: the disease introduced into the political or social body as a vaccine is forever in danger of becoming the new dominant illness.[7]

The brilliance of Palahniuk's critique lies in the subtle way *Fight Club* anticipates and outmaneuvers the reactions of its audience. The novel's ending only deepens the mystery surrounding the split between the narrator and Tyler. Instead of leading the audience to believe that Tyler was definitively a figment of the narrator's imagination, the book turns this twist back on itself:

> So, now that I know about Tyler, will he just disappear?
>
> "No," Tyler says, still holding my hand, "I wouldn't be here in the first place if you didn't want me. I'll still live my life while you're asleep, but if you fuck with me, if you chain yourself to the bed at night or take big doses of sleeping pills, then we'll be enemies. And I'll get you for it."
>
> Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He's a disassociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination.

[7]Another danger, as Baudrillard points out, is that this quest to eliminate disease altogether breeds its own set of paradoxes: "Total prophylaxis is lethal. This is what medicine has failed to grasp: it treats cancer or AIDS as if they were conventional illnesses, when in fact they are illnesses generated by the very success of prophylaxis and medicine, illnesses bred of the disappearance of illnesses, of the elimination of pathogenic forms. […] Suddenly all afflictions seem to originate in immunodeficiency – rather as all violence now seems to have its roots in terrorism" (Baudrillard 64).

> "Fuck that shit," Tyler says. "Maybe you're *my* schizophrenic hallucination." (168)

Palahniuk builds on this last observation in the final chapter, leaving the book enticingly open-ended. Is the fascist Tyler a figment of the narrator's imagination, or is the bourgeois, everyman narrator in turn the creation of a madman named Tyler Durden, a patient from a mental hospital that could easily be confused with "heaven"? By refusing to come down on either side, Palahniuk satirizes the boundaries of left and right, self and other, friend and enemy: it is this very act of division that creates the fascism of ideology. Once this psychology has taken hold, the revolutionary moment of perfection has passed, and the shadowy hand of history that once cupped Ozymandias, Christ, Napoleon, and Tyler Durden in its palm, moves on.[8]

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[8] Ozymandias was a warrior-king whose great deeds were supposed to have won him immortality, but who had since fallen into obscurity. He is the subject of one of Percy Shelley's most famous poems, which Palahniuk references at the end of Chapter 28.

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Disease and Community in Chuck Palahniuk's Early Novels

Antonio Casado de Rocha

"Philosophy is perfectly right," wrote Kierkegaard, "in saying that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other clause — that it must be lived forward" (12). This advice seems to be taken seriously by the American writer Chuck Palahniuk, whose reason to write is that "life never works except in retrospect . . . since you can't control life, at least you can control your version" (*Stranger Than Fiction* 205). For him, writing becomes a way of looking back in order to live a more authentic life, to "stop living as a reaction to circumstances and start living as a force for what you say should be" (215). The presence of such typically existentialist concerns in a best-selling author is certainly a matter of philosophical interest.

The focus of this short, introductory article lies on the first novels by Palahniuk—in particular, on *Fight Club* (1996), *Survivor* (1999), and *Choke* (2001). These three works can be read almost like a single text, sharing a contemporary setting, first-person narratives, a sharp post-modernist style, and a number of common themes that are central also to existentialism, if we are to understand it as a radical doctrine of individual freedom and responsibility. According to David E. Cooper, existentialist ethics claims that (*a*) moral values are 'created' rather than 'discovered', (*b*) moral responsibility is more extensive than usually assumed, and (*c*) moral life should not be a matter of following rules. I would like to argue that these claims are specially visible in some crisis or climax occurring in the novels in connection with their treatment of disease and community, or—to be more precise—in their narrator's movement *from* disease *to* community.

"A QUICKIE EXISTENTIAL CRISIS"

The characters in Palahniuk's fiction usually have an unorthodox approach to life, but their main goal is quite straightforward—to find a way to live together with other people. In *Choke*, the narrator enacts his own death and resurrection every night, as does in some other way the narrator of *Fight Club*. *Survivor* is a wild parody of religion in America, but all its narrator wants is to be redeemed from his Christ-like role in order to be accepted back into human community. Eventually, the characters achieve this same reunion with their peers, but through the new "religious" forums of 12-step groups, writers' workshops or support groups.

Those characters are not likeable or innocent. In *Postcards from the Future* (2003), a documentary filmed at Edinboro University Pennsylvania in a conference to discuss the work of Palahniuk, he said that he does not "typically like [his] characters." What Erik Ronald Mortenson has written about *The Plague* can also be said about Palahniuk's books—that they are "less about creating idiosyncratic characters than demonstrating the range of human response to the de-humanizing condition of disease and death" (37). Actually, his stories often emerge from an illness or some other personal issue that the narrator cannot resolve: insomnia, consumerism and male anxiety in *Fight Club*, several psychiatric disorders in *Survivor*, or sex addiction and senile dementia in *Choke*.

Palahniuk's familiarity with existentialist thought is explicit in his non-fiction work. In *Stranger Than Fiction*, his 2004 collection of essays, he quotes from Kierkegaard and uses the Heideggerian concept of *Bestand*—resources available for manipulation by a world-configuring, nihilistic destiny—to illustrate his emphasis on storytelling as a contemporary form of religion (213, 31-2). Palahniuk sees as inevitable that people without access to natural or social resources will turn to the only *Bestand* that is left for them—their life stories, their intellectual

property. The problem, he notes, is that this might lead us to living only for the sake of the story that our experiences might make, thus creating a sort of self-slavery. In the first novel written by Palahniuk, *Invisible Monsters*, which was only published in 1999, after the success of the movie adaptation of *Fight Club*, the main character rebels against this kind of slavery: "I'm not straight, and I'm not gay," she says. "I'm not bisexual. I want out of the labels. I don't want my whole life crammed into a single word. A story. I want to find something else, unknowable, some place to be that's not on the map. A real adventure" (261).

These novels take the reader to some extreme places in search of such real adventures, and the knowledge that they might afford. By writing, by "controlling the story of [our] past," Palahniuk hopes we might learn the craft to accept full responsibility for our life: "We'll develop our ability to imagine in finer and finer detail. We can more exactly focus on what we want to accomplish, to attain, to become" (*Stranger Than Fiction* 37). Because, as Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out in his lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism," at the end of the day we become what we accomplish. Standard existentialist doctrine—you are nothing else but what you live.

In *Survivor*, the narrator learns the hard way that morality is not simply a matter of discovering some principles when "everything that he worked for in the world is lost. All his external rules and controls are gone . . . just dawning on him is the idea that now anything is possible. / Now he wants everything" (*Survivor* 167). Because he now wants everything, his newly acquired moral responsibility is much bigger than before, when he was "the hardworking salt of the earth" and all he wanted was "to go to Heaven".

And that is when the narrator "had what the psychology textbooks would call a quickie existential crisis" (*Survivor* 159). Standard existentialist doctrine, again—everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and thus the narrator is in consequence forlorn, without excuse. He can be anything, but his

desire to be everything brings him to a state that Sartre described as anguish, abandonment and despair. Tyler Durden confronts the narrator of *Fight Club* with the certainty of death (67) and later on he will want "the whole world to hit bottom" (115). His crisis is also similar to the one suffered by the narrator of *Choke* when he affirms that "We live and we die and anything else is just delusion. . . . Just made-up subjective emotional crap. There is no soul. There is no God. There's just decisions and disease and death." (156)

DEATH AND DISEASE

All the novels take place in a contemporary context where disease and death have become increasingly "medicalized." In the past century there has been an increasing institutionalization of medicine, and as a result terminally ill people are often excluded from participation in normal social life. This estrangement in the face of serious disease and mortality precipitates suffering, as there is a strong cultural tendency to disconnect death from public visibility and social consciousness (Moller 2000: 50).

Against this tendency to make death invisible, awareness of mortality is one of the engines behind *Fight Club*. "On a long enough time line, the survival rate for everyone will drop to zero" (7). Or, in other words, the moment the individual realizes his or her own being, he or she understands it as "being-towards-death," to use an expression from Heidegger. "This is your life, and it's ending one minute at a time," the narrator says (19). Storytelling is an act of rebellion against this realization. "This isn't really death," Tyler Durden says. "We'll be legend" (1). Other characters decide to ignore death: "If she was going to die, Marla didn't want to know about it" (99). But there is no escaping this topic, although in the other novels it appears in lighter tones: "In some other program RELEASED used to mean a client was set free. Now it means a client is dead. . . . Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. This is how things get recycled" (*Survivor* 247).

Another narrative engine is the contemplation of disease. The narrator of *Fight Club* went to his first support group after he had gone to a doctor about his insomnia. "My doctor said, if I wanted to see real pain, I should . . . See the degenerative bone diseases. The organic brain dysfunctions. See the cancer patients getting by" (9). This is a place where everyone "smiles with that invisible gun to their head," where awareness of death is public. As a result, after the support group he feels more alive than he had ever felt, "the little warm center that the life of the world crowded around" (12). Exposure to disease can work the other way, though. "After you find out all the things that can go wrong, your life becomes less about living and more about waiting. For cancer. For dementia." After his second year in medical school, the narrator of *Choke* learns all this, "and there's no going back. . . . A bruise means cirrhosis of the liver. . . . Everybody you see naked, you see as a patient" (105, 104). Our world is "a world of symbols" (151), and cultural over-interpretation leads to hypochondria. A nice example is found in *Fight Club*, when the narrator remembers a birthmark in his foot that, for a while, some doctors thought could be a sign of cancer. He is afraid of showing his feet in public: "My fear is that people will see my foot and I'll start to die in their minds. The cancer I don't have is everywhere now" (97).

Amongst other reasons, disease is everywhere because its standards vary according to social and cultural change. The narrator of *Survivor* mocks this when he says that, "According to the *Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, [he] should go into a store and shoplift. [He] should go work off some pent-up sexual energy." (178) The textbook changes from edition to edition, establishing "the new definitions of what's acceptable, what's normal, what's sane. . . . Edition to edition, the symptoms change. Sane people are insane by a new standard" (88). And every new condition is "waiting for the *Diagnosis Statistical Manual* to give it a code of its own so treatment can be billed to medical insurance" (*Choke* 17).

Sane or insane, most people who live long enough in the Western world will end their lives in a health institution. Meanwhile, they will stay as visitors, or rather like the narrator of *Invisible Monsters*, who "spent a whole summer as property of La Paloma Memorial Hospital" (202). There they become *Bestand* for health-care professionals, are classified, placed in a safe environment (*Choke* 55), and subjected to a daily routine: "Every day in the hospital goes like this: Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. Sister Katherine falls in between. On television is one network running nothing but infomercial" (*Invisible Monsters* 46).

In *Choke*, the narrator spends a lot of time in a private care center, visiting his senile mother, Ida Mancini (quite appropriately, in Spanish *Ida* means "insane female"). Ida is still in the first floor, the one "for people who forget names" (56). It is not a bad place; things can get worse, as Marla discovers in *Fight Club* when she visits the place "where you end up if you don't have health insurance" (99). The narrator of *Choke* is trying to save Ida, even if at a high personal cost. But after all, as another character says, "We do it every day. Kill the unborn to save the elderly . . . every time we burn a gallon of gas or an acre of rain forest, aren't we killing the future to preserve the present?" (124).

Moreover, in *Fight Club* it is the very present that is being lost, because mainstream Western culture has commodified life to the extent that generations "have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need" (141). When Tyler Durden starts his "great revolution against the culture," it is also a rebellion against the commodification of life and health, because "the things your used to own, now they own you" (34). It is a rebellion for autonomy, and not an easy one; Durden keeps referring to his colleagues in Project Mayhem as "space monkeys" revealing them to still be slaves, like the first monkeys shot into space like test subjects. But the rebellion might be at least partially successful. The narrator of *Fight Club* begins as a regular consumer of narcotics ("I wanted little blue Amytal Sodium capsules, 200 milligram-sized. I wanted red-and-blue Tuinal bullet

capsules, lipstick-red Seconals"), but eventually he rejects them, saying, "[n]ow sleeping is the last thing I want to do" (9, 172).

This commodification of health is shown at its most extreme in *Survivor*, when the agent asks the narrator to name any disease, because they "have a cure ready for it" (147). But what they really have is the copyright for its commercial name: "an inventory of almost fifteen thousand copyrighted names for products that are still in development . . . As soon as someone else develops the product they come to us, sometimes by choice, sometimes not" (146).

CHOICE AND COMMUNITY

As we have seen, the "quickie existential crisis" leads to a rebellion for higher levels of autonomy and choice. "Losing all hope was freedom" in *Fight Club* (12). The existentialist belief in freedom is based on a phenomenological description of our everyday lives. If the external rules are gone, we face an open range of possible courses of action and no received values force us to choose one course of action over the others. Rather, it is the other way around—for Sartre, to choose between this or that is to affirm the value of that which is chosen. Actually, even Ida Mancini—the spokesperson for Palahniuk's reflections about "rebellion as a way to hide out" and "criticism as a fake participation" (*Choke* 111)—expresses her wish to have had "the courage not to fight and doubt everything" and wishes she could have said just once, "*This*. This is good enough. Just because I *choose* it" (207).

If one is not aware of making choices, a moment's reflection shows that one is always deciding his or her own life, just like the narrator of *Survivor* when he notes that "in the bathroom with [him] are razor blades. Here is iodine to drink. Here are sleeping pills to swallow. You have a choice. Live or die. / Every breath is a choice. / Every minute is a choice" (161). This permanent possibility of suicide as the warrant of freedom is similar to what Albert Camus presented in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He opened his

argument with the suggestion that once one chooses to live, all other decisions are secondary: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy" (3).

Palahniuk's main characters, however, do not commit suicide; typically, they must go on living and taking responsibility for their choices. The possibility of suicide is there to relieve anxiety and to act as a catalyst for a more authentic life. Authenticity entails treating other people so as to encourage a sense of freedom on their part, although according to Cooper there is disagreement as to the primary forms such treatment should take: "Some have argued that we promote a sense of freedom through commitment to certain causes; others that this is best achieved through personal relationships." In this open debate, *Choke* seems to favor the second option. Although it might sound like a paradox, some addicts in this novel (Victor, Denny, Tracy) are looking for freedom through commitment to a cause—namely, their addiction—but this freedom is only realized by building something together.

The narrator of *Choke* is an addict and likes it, because while "everybody is waiting for some blind, random disaster or some sudden disease, the addict has the comfort of knowing what will most likely wait for him down the road. He's taken some control over his ultimate fate" (185-6). But addiction is not "something you just walk away from" (*Invisible Monsters* 285). Tracy, the addict who introduces the narrator into casual sex, does not really want to know why she keeps being an addict, because she is educated enough to "deconstruct any fantasy" and talk herself out of any plan. "I just keep doing," she says (*Choke* 257). However, this strategy fails in the case of Victor and Dennis—and at the end of the novel, the final image is one that favors personal relationships and community-building as the only feasible way to freedom.

As the narrator of *Survivor*, who is addicted to media attention, the narrator of *Fight Club* loves support groups because "if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention . . . they really saw you. Everything else . . . went out the window" (98). This does not happen in *Survivor*, at least not between the narrator and the caseworker, who "turns her clipboard around for me to read and hands it over for my signature at the bottom. This is to prove she was here. That we talked. We shared" (248). Unlike the commodified, fake attention portrayed in *Survivor*, people in support groups "listened instead of just waiting for their turn to speak. / And when they spoke, they weren't telling you a story. When the two of you talked, you were building something, and afterward you were both different than before" (98).

According to this, the individual is most authentic when he most opens up to the other in dialogue, building something different together. As Vilhjálmur Árnason has argued, this is the "magic" of a good, authentic conversation: "we do not control it as individuals but are caught up in it and give in to its own movement, which is governed by the subject matter" (Árnason 237). As Fertility says in *Survivor*, one does not have to control everything, mainly because one cannot control everything (50), so we might as well give in and accept that "We just are" (*Fight Club* 198).

Palahniuk himself has seen as the central motive of all his books "a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people." (*Stranger Than Fiction* xv). The narrator of *Fight Club* is sleepless and lonely in his apartment, slave to his nesting instinct. The narrator of *Invisible Monsters* is isolated because of her looks. In *Survivor*, the narrator is the only remaining member of a repressive cult. In *Choke*, the narrator is a sex addict because "Just for these minutes, I don't feel lonely" (20). These characters destroy their lovely nests and return to the outside world in search of some company, which they eventually find. And "After so long

living alone, it feels good to say 'we'" (*Choke* 264). Happy ending, after all.

Sartre stated that his trust in humanity was in people with whom he shared a commitment "to a definite, common cause." His trust was in the unity of "a party or a group" over which he could have more or less control. This kind of small community "whose movements at every moment are known", like a club or a cult, is very close to the sort of solutions to existential crisis that can be found in Palahniuk's fiction. Because if we cannot gather together in the face of anything other than violence, sex, trance, and horror, at least we can commiserate.

That is, as Palahniuk concisely expresses it in *Survivor*, we can at least "all [be] miserable together" (278).

That is, human community as a support group.

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Muscular Existentialism in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

Andrew Hock Soon Ng

For someone familiar even with the basic tenets of existentialist philosophy, it is not difficult to elicit strains of it in Chuck Palahniuk's controversial 1997 novel.[15] A story about a man living a routine and inconsequential life, and who then projects his desire to break free onto an alter ego that culminates into a destructive individual, *Fight Club* neatly packages existentialism for the scarcely uninitiated in both its thematic concerns and adequate doses of rather "hip" phrases that smack profoundly of the philosophy. For example, statements like "Losing all hope was freedom" (22),[16] and "you are not a beautiful and unique snowflake" (134), that, in the novel, are self-conscious axioms which reiterate the protagonist's desperate humanness, clearly recall Sartre's view of the Nothingness that characterises the human subject. In the novel, Tyler Durden, the protagonist's double, is out to rescue a "generation of men raised by women" (50). As himself, the Narrator is a bored, emasculated male who takes pride in his "lovely nest" (his apartment) and surrounds himself with IKEA furniture (44); but as his double, he is "to everybody … Tyler Durden the Great and Powerful. God and Father" (199). In order to get that way, however, he must undo a subject position that has been constructed entirely on the foundation of leisure, complacency and technological efficiency – all of which are trademarks of a cultural system which Fredric Jameson terms "late capitalism", or more familiarly, postmodernism.

In this essay, I wish to pursue two related arguments that highlight the vexed relationship between postmodernism,

Notes

[15] The film adaptation directed by David Fincher came out in 1999.

[16] All references to the novel are to the Vintage edition.

existentialism and masculinity as depicted in the narrative. The first is an appropriation of Sartre's concept of transcendence as insinuated through the "double" motif in the novel. That is, I read Tyler Durden as the Narrator's desire to surpass his existential limitation and to transform his being. That such an approach to freedom recalls Sartre's philosophy will be made evident. But because *Fight Club*'s homage to existentialism is heavily drawn along gender lines, the philosophy becomes in a sense co-opted by a masculine (or more appropriately, "muscular") imagination that underlies the narrative's trajectory. Related to this is also an inherently narcissistic and homosocial agenda, of which, I will demonstrate, is related to an endeavour to reconstitute a masculinity that has been castrated by postmodernism. Tyler's brand of philosophy is deeply self-preservative; his "Fight Club" and later, "Project Mayhem", may seem a collective effort to battle postmodern emasculation, but it is really an act of self-aggrandisement in the face of possible dissolution. My second argument involves a consideration of the narrative's postmodern concerns. In the novel, it is clear that this cultural manifestation is feminised and subtly incriminated for the symbolic castration of an entire generation of men. *Fight Club* may defy narrative linearity in its pastiche-like construction and seem to celebrate the fragmentation of the notion of self (and in this way announce its postmodernity), but careful reading would reveal the narrative's resistance to seriously deconstruct masculinity. Tyler Durden's objective is to reverse postmodern's damage through the deployment of an androcentric-directed philosophy. The central motif that links these two arguments is the "double", which interestingly, has received little scholarly attention with regards to the narrative.[17] For me, the double effectively captures the existential dilemma experienced by the Narrator, whose symptoms of malaise and redundancy necessarily provoke a reconstitution of

[17] See for example, Boon's (2003) and Tuss's (2004) essay that actually seem to treat the Narrator and Tyler as two separate beings altogether, eliding the doubling motif altogether.

being in the form of an alter ego. Because the Narrator feels too defeated by circumstances, he can only rise above his state as an other within himself.

Two final notes before I begin my examination: firstly, my theoretical framework on existentialism largely relies on Sartre's version, although I appropriate other related philosophers whenever relevant. This is largely because resonance of Sartre's notions of being, nothingness and transcendence seem to thread through the narrative, and I wish to develop a critical reading of *Fight Club* based on these concepts. Secondly, my essay focuses primarily on the novel as it presents a more ambivalent treatment of masculinity. This is especially evident towards the end of the narrative when there seems to be an ironic shift that may suggest a criticism of masculinity after touting it so vigorously throughout. But because its denouement is ambiguous, this irony may actually be a final *coup de grace* to reinstate the masculine intent after all.

In *Fight Club*, it is quite apparent that men have lost their place as the dominant sex, and have been reduced to a bunch of weak and vulnerable individuals. Soon after the Narrator is introduced, we find him attending support groups such as "Remaining Men Together" (a support group for men suffering from testicular cancer, in which crying is common practice) to seek a solution for his insomnia. In surrounding himself with misery and dying bodies, the Narrator evinces a direct existential proclivity in his quest: "This was freedom. Losing all hope was freedom. If I didn't say anything, people in a group assumed the worst. They cried harder. I cried harder. Look up into the stars and you're gone" (22). This somewhat echoes Sartre point when he writes, in *Being and Nothingness*, that "Freedom is the human being putting his past out of play by secreting his own nothingness" (Sartre: 64). Identifying himself with people who are more or less hopeless, the Narrator can afford to vicariously experience a sense of mounting his state of inconsequentiality. He tells us, "Walking home after a support group, I felt more alive than I'd ever felt. I wasn't host to cancer or blood parasites; I was

the little centre that the life of the world crowded around. And I slept. Babies don't sleep this well" (22). But one should not regard such an attempt to overcome a specific state of being as a form of transcendence; instead, Sartre calls such a practice "sadism". A sadist, as Sartre contends, "is a being who apprehends the Other as the instrument whose function is his own incarnation" (Sartre: 522). In other words, he manipulates the flesh of an other in order to *realise* his own flesh; he depends on other bodies to reiterate his own, thus establishing his own presence through the "fleshliness" (Sartre: 525) of others – becoming "reborn", as it were. Viewed in this light, not only is the term "sadist" apt in describing the Narrator's position, but the word "baby" in the passage takes on deeper significance as well. Yet, Sartre warns that sadism is ultimately unsustainable because the "fleshliness" of an other will always confront his need to appropriate it within his "complex system of instrumentality" (Sartre: 525) with his own disintegration. Sartre's argument, if I read him correctly, is that the "flesh-as-instrument" (Sartre: 524) is only effective insofar as to reveal the facticity of the sadist's own being-in-itself, or the fact of his being. Beyond this, the body of an other can do nothing: "It is there, and it is there for *nothing*" (Sartre: 525, author's emphasis). It cannot radically transform the sadist, or move the sadist towards another plain of being. In other words, the body of an other may help the self establish his own being-in-itself, but it does nothing for his being-for-itself. Only the being-for-itself transcendence.

Related to the Narrator's existential sadism is also a self-preservative tactic that implicates a narcissistic impulse. To unpack this reading, I recourse to Mikkel Borch-Jakobsen's discussion on the narcissistic ego. Unlike Freud who argues that narcissism is the failure to transfer self-, or ego-love onto an object (object love), Borch-Jakobsen contends that even when such a transference has occurred, *narcissism may still be potently present.* The pathologising of homosexuals in Borch-Jakobsen's theory is unfortunate, but for the critical purpose of interrogating *Fight Club*, it serves well. According to him:

> the narcissistic ego is already homosexual (already "object-oriented"), it already loves itself as it is going to love the other myself (it loves itself similar to itself). And that is what explains, too, the fact that the first object – the first other - is once again a (my)self (is once again "narcissistic")… the homosexual object is not really an later ego (another *self* as *other* self), since it is similar or analogous to the ego (Borch-Jakobsen: 85).

The object of desire is merely a metonymical extension of the desiring ego, and not an externalised loved object. In *Fight Club*, the Narrator's visits to support groups exposes his desire to identify with others in order to, unconsciously, preserve self-love. Their hopelessness and potential erasure of future reinforces his sense of continuity. He can afford to be generous in his libidinal economy precisely because they do not disrupt his narcissistic impulse, but actually emphasise and reassure it. Again, the word "baby" is significant because within such an environment, the Narrator's egocentric position is inflated. But Borch-Jakobsen also deliberates that if at any point the ego finds itself threatened by an object's increasing attraction, the object must be destroyed: "hostility arises straight out of the relation to one's neighbour from the moment the latter is loved as (a) myself , from the very moment he presents to me as an adverse "I" – an outsider – who is infinitely dispossessing me of myself, since he is at once what is nearest to me and what is farthest away" (Borch-Jakobsen: 90). What culminates is a "rage that overwhelms me at the sight of him, one which "no satisfaction can appease" except a violent resolution: "Either him or me" (Borch-Jakobsen: 92). This is a paradoxical situation because the loved object (and this does not necessarily have to be a person) must never be loved to an extent that the desiring ego is endangered. In the novel, this is most evident when the Narrator, as Tyler, destroys his own "lovely nest" (44). Another example is when the Narrator targets a beautiful newcomer to fight club (whom he nicknames Angel Face), and

brutalises him. Angel Face is potentially attractive to Tyler/the Narrator, which would then threaten the latter's ego-libido; thus he must be "destroyed" in order for the Narrator to preserve Tyler's attachment to himself (122). This episode's underlying homoerotic subtext (which reiterates Borch-Jakobsen's theory) is more evident in the film version.

With the arrival of Marla Singer, the Narrator's comfort in attending support groups comes to an abrupt end. Like the Narrator, Marla is also a "big fake" and a support group "tourist" (24). The Narrator's well-being is threatened once again, evidenced by his insomnia recurring. I propose two related ways to understand this turn-of-events. From an existentialist framework, Marla is the "fleshliness" that finally confronts the Narrator with the facticity of his being. Having become "(re)incarnated" by so many bodies, he has reached a saturation point where he realises that there is *nothing* beyond the flesh. The other cannot motivate his being-for-itself. And because of the narrative's insidious sexual politics, it is not surprising that a woman is "instrumental" for the sudden disruption of the Narrator's state of equilibrium, reiterating his castration complex all over again. From the viewpoint of a narcissistic reading, Marla's presence poses as a real threat to the Narrator's sense of security because *he is genuinely attracted to her*. Unlike the people in support groups with whom the Narrator can identify without having to sacrifice his own ego-libido, Marla commands a potential transference of ego-libido to object-libido that directly endangers his narcissistic impulse.

Tyler enters the Narrator's life at this point. This, for me, is the narrative's answer to symbolic castration – to reinstate a strong masculine presence that will stave the encroaching feminisation of culture. Marla's effect must be reversed. Indeed, even the Narrator's narcissistic impulse is directly related to the lack of a strong male influence, for according to Freud, such a deficiency is the result of a failed process of oedipalisation. Freud argues that narcissism in later life evinces the inability to relinquish its

attachment to his self, or ego-libido, and transfer it to an object (Freud 1914: 78). This ego-libido, of course, depends for much of its libidinal economy on maternal identification; the refusal to forego self-love is fundamentally a reluctance to reject the mother who has been introjected into the self, and who is now *part* of the self. Only by falling in love can this narcissistic tendency be broken, because it transfers the maternal within onto an externalised figure, thus directly cathecting the introjected mother from the self (it must be remembered, of course, that Freud's theory is only pertinent to the sexual development of men). In the case of the Narrator's sadism, the Narrator initially fails to realise that instrumentalising the flesh of others does not help him transcend his state of being, but merely reinforces his state of emasculated inertia (being-in-itself). The solution to his problem must be one that allows a transcendental experience, a reconstitution of self-love, and most importantly, an amplification of the masculine presence in his life. This last aspect is crucial because it directly implicates the first two. Once masculinity is exerted (in a muscular mode, as I will elaborate later), the Narrator will encounter a transcendental experience (that is, he will rise above his feminised position); and because Tyler is ultimately the Narrator's alter ego (although the latter does not realise this at first), the Narrator has effectively reintegrated his ego-libido precisely by inflating it.[18] To do this, he adopts a kind of belief system, one reminiscent of existentialism, that promotes hyper-masculinity.

Fight Club borrows a Gothic motif to represent the Narrator's transcendental experience *via* Tyler. As the Narrator's double, Tyler is able to perform and achieve whatever the Narrator could only passively desire. Tyler's philosophical trajectory is not only masculine, but muscular as well, which suggests an updated,

[18] But such a strategy is already inherently unstable; by recuperating a powerful male presence to reinforce his narcissistic impulse, what the Narrator does not realise is that he is merely strengthening the maternal (that is, the feminine) within him. I will elaborate on this matter at the end of this essay.

existentialist-slanted version of "muscular Christianity" – a philosophico-ethical mode of being which informed the way men constructed themselves in the nineteenth-century. This ideology, as historian David Rosen argues, has never been entirely eradicated, but continues to assert its presence spectrally into the postmodern era:

> Are today's overt ideological revivals of Victorian masculinity simply the death rattles of a concept no longer functional? … Whereas the mid-nineteenth-century men's movement used the natural history and the anthropology of the day to reach its goal of laying an eternal foundation for manliness, the late-twentieth-century men's movement often relies on outmoded nineteenth-century mythology for its notion of the natural and primitive. Men today, like those before, may fear feminization, democratization, and the erosion of their power. Thus they may also feel a need to create a new and lasting foundation for manhood. But the foundation they are creating is neither new nor eternal. Anglo-American masculinity has been building on it since the mid-nineteenth century, at the very latest. (Rosen: 41 – 2)

This view is strikingly echoed in Palahniuk's novel especially in the way in which Tyler's program to recuperate "manliness" is premised on a philosophy that promotes machismo, physical endurance and brutality ("natural and primitive"), all of which are encapsulated in the tenets of fight club. But as Rosen also contends, such a strategy is inherently paradoxical and problematic, largely because it is *fantastic*. Tyler believes that there is a form of manliness that is "natural" but which has become diluted in the present moment by the feminised space of postmodernism. He does not understand that his brand of "manliness" is, in truth, a historical construction (and therefore "artificial") that has become "naturalised" through the reiteration of its fantasy (cf. Butler 1993). This disavowal of historical consciousness, however, is an important factor in transcendence.

As Sartre contends in *Being and Nothingness*, nothingness can only be effected if one's past is negated or denied:

> In the internal negation the for-itself collapses on what it denies. The qualities denied are precisely those to which the for-itself is most present; it is from them that it derives its negative force and perpetually renews it. In this sense it is necessary to see the denied qualities as a constitutive factor of the being of the for-itself, for the for-itself must be there outside upon them; it must be *they* in order to deny that it is they. In short the term-of-origin of the internal negation is the in-itself, the thing which *is there*, and outside of it there is nothing except an emptiness, a nothingness which is distinguished from the thing only by a pure negation for which *this* thing furnishes the very content. (Sartre: 245, author's emphasis)

To transcend, it is inevitable, even *necessary* (in Sartre's term), that the individual must realise that he is always already implicated by the very thing that must be denied, because the act of denying must presuppose the denier's constitutive relationship to the "thing" denied. This thing interpellates the being on the level of the in-itself, and for this, the in-itself too must be overcome because it is what fundamentally prevents the for-itself from transcending (one cannot negate one's state of in-itself, because the in-itself *is*). Hence, the for-itself, in order to transcend, must reach out to nothingness. Based on such a logic, the motif of the double is indeed appropriate for an existentialist exposition. The Gothic double is precisely the internal struggle between two versions of beings within a self, usually identified on a moral scale (that is, good versus evil).[19] In existentialism, the contention is between the being-in-itself and the being-for-itself. Because of the existential limitations encountered which renders him inert, the Narrator in *Fight Club* must create a space within his consciousness which will

[19] For a useful study of the double in Gothic literature, see Andrew J. Webber's *Doppelgänger*, esp. chapter 6.

enable him to rise above his situation.[20] This space is a void, and from it Tyler is engendered. Understood in this light, it is only reasonable that Tyler's philosophical mainstay would propound nothingness as the foundation of freedom. Born of nothingness, he will now encourage an embracing of nothingness as the "way" to self-redemption. All this directly reinforces Sartre's point that "The being of consciousness qua consciousness is to exist *at a distance from itself* as a presence to itself, and this empty distance which being carries in its being is Nothingness. Thus in order for the *self* to exist, it is necessary that the unity of this being include its own nothingness as the nihilation of identity" (Sartre: 125, author's emphasis).

According to philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, "Every disillusionment consequent on depriving man of faith in some reality on which he had set store brings into the foreground and permits the discovery of the reality of what remains to him, a reality that has previously escaped his attention …. Now, having lost his faith … man finds himself compelled to take his stand on the only thing left to him, his disillusionment" (y Gasset: 140). It could be argued that Tyler is created precisely out of the Narrator's own disillusionment with this life and himself. To the Narrator, Tyler is everything he is not: Tyler is courageous, smart, funny, charming, forceful, independent, commanding and totally in control. "Tyler is capable and free, and I am not" (174). According to Tyler, to achieve that state of freedom, one must first acknowledge that he is "stupid" and that he "will die" (76), that he stands "at the edge of the bottom of darkness and piss" (77). Becoming aware is to "take a step closer to hitting bottom" (78). Read against Sartre's point that "Freedom is the human being putting his past out of play by secreting his own nothingness" (64), the existentialist tendency in Tyler's philosophy is unmistakable. Invariably, the "past" which the Narrator seeks to transcend *via*

[20] That is, to enable his being-for-itself to transcend. As William Barrett notes, "*Being-for-itself* (*pour soi*) is coextensive with the realm of consciousness, and the nature of consciousness is that it is perpetually beyond itself" (Barrett: 245)

Tyler is his temporal *angst* instituted by a postmodern bourgeois existence. The Narrator must return to "ground zero" – to becoming nothing, as it were – in order to undo the processes which have resulted in his current situation. When the Narrator first goes to see his doctor about his insomnia, he is told that it is a symptom of "something larger" (19). As the narrative unfolds, that something larger seems to point to the crisis of masculinity in the postmodern landscape. In the Narrator's case, his feminisation by space is most effectively depicted in his intimate relationship with his apartment where he attains a certain existential stability through purchasing the latest cutlery, shelves, furniture and sofa:

> You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. But the sofa, then for a couple of years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. (44)

It is not that the Narrator is unaware of his own entrapment. As he tells us, "Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you" (44). The narrator, however, cannot escape this vicious cycle because there is *no where to which he can escape*. The other lived space he inhabits is his workplace, but there, his sense of insufficiency is even more pronounced. In the end, the Narrator's intimacy with his home is, according Palladino and Young, his projection of a feeling of dissatisfaction with his public self onto a personal space, and "as such, the Narrator's understanding of himself is tied to the domestic sphere, conventionally understood as the location of female work, consumption and identity" (Palladino and Young: 205). It must be emphasised, however, that the narrator's feminisation does *not* stem from his familiarity with his home; indeed, this intimacy is the result of the Narrator's sense of emasculation experienced in the industrial sphere, a domain traditionally associated with maleness. Unsurprisingly, in order for the Narrator to achieve an existential freedom, the first step he must take is to detonate his

home (44), and directly eradicate his closest source of weakness. But he can only do this through his alter ego.

Destroying his home may wrest him away from a feminine space, but to radically undo the effects of cultural feminisation, something else must be instigated – something that would directly invigorate the Narrator's flagging manhood. Fight club is the result. Here, in a "basement of a bar" (5), the Narrator/Tyler and a group of men come to re-establish the maleness through brute (and brutal) assertions. The Narrator tells us:

> Fight club isn't about winning or losing fights. Fight club isn't about words. You see a guy come to fight club for the first time his ass is a loaf of bread. You see the guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood …. There's grunting and noise at fight club like at a gym, but fight club isn't about looking good. There's hysterical shouting in tongues like a church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved. (51)

The association of the club with a church reinforces Tyler's god-like desire and position, and its effects on the men who attend the meetings attests to his successful missionary work.[21] Tyler blames the frailty of fathers, including his, for his generation's diminished masculinity. In the narrative, when drawing out the tenets of fight club, he intersperses each one with vague accounts of his relationship with his father (50 – 1). Finally, confronted with the question as to what he is really fighting, "Tyler said, his father" (53). Of course, it must emphasised again that Tyler is the Narrator's alter ego. As himself, the Narrator cannot disavow his

[21] Fight Club has been read from theological and ethical standpoints which question the loss of the traditional male identity, especially one that is related to a muscular Christian identity, in postmodernism. See, for example, Deacey (2002) and Duncan (2003). I am rather wary of the latter's almost militant argument to rejuvenate a waning masculinity as a stand against the "evil" of liberalism (which in this essay, seems to suggest postmodern relativism). At one point, the writer argues that "It would have almost been a relief if the writers [the essay refers to the film version of *Fight Club*] could have taken their 'fascism' seriously as an alternative rather than mocking it – at least then there would have been something to talk about" (Duncan: 137).

father because it would leave him with no subjective and historical anchoring. Also, to reject one's father would occasion guilt as well. Which is why a double is necessary. Otto Rank, in his classic study of the double, writes that the "most prominent symptom of the forms which the double takes is a powerful consciousness of guilt which forces the hero no longer to accept the responsibility for certain actions of his ego, but to place it upon another ego, a double … "(Rank: 76). Through Tyler, the Narrator can simultaneously vent his anger at his father without the attendant guilty feeling because it is no longer his father that is being vilified (at least on the conscious level). At the same time, the Narrator can also transfer his identification to a new paternal presence, for Tyler also serves as a kind of father-figure to the Narrator.[22]

Such a disavowal of the father is also in line with the rejection of a history that has petrified the being-for-itself within the being-in-itself. This generation of men has been raised by women precisely because the fathers have relinquished their position of authority (again, the Narrator's father is representative [51]). But although the Narrator rejects the historical father, he is unwilling to relinquish the paternal configuration altogether. The father-figure remains an undying force that subtly motivates Tyler's program (cf. Rosen's view above on the endurance of muscular Christianity). According to him, "[if] you're male. And you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God" (186).[23] The failure of the father, by metonymic association, is also the failure of God. In bringing "salvation" to

[22] This is most evident when the Narrator feels infantilised by Tyler's and Marla's (who by this time, is seeing Tyler, thus relegating her as the "maternal" complement in the Narrator's imagination) estranged relationship (66). He does not realise, of course, that it is really himself who is dating Marla. He cannot seem to understand Marla's unwarranted anger and frustration at him for being unassuming and distant (this is during his "waking" moments). Marla, who is unaware of the Narrator's schizophrenia, cannot understand what he is at one moment passionate and charming, and at another cold and callous. The impasse is ultimately due to the fact that the Narrator is prohibited by Tyler from speaking about him to Marla.

[23] This view is actually expressed by "the mechanic", one of the members of Tyler's fight club.

men, Tyler's underlying motive is to rescue the paternal-figure by transfiguring it, with himself as the *new god and father* to a generation of rejuvenated men. This reading somewhat accords, albeit in a different theoretical context, with Krister Friday's assessment of the novel when she argues that Tyler wants to both witness history's destruction and be witnessed by History as the messiah of a new, muscularised epoch (Friday: para. 27). The two modes of history must be carefully delineated: while history is linked to men's relationship with the temporal, History – akin to the Lacanian Big Other – is the sum of man's existence witnessed from the vantage point of the Eternal (such as an omnipresent God). While history can be manipulated and redirected, History functions as the destination at which all historical rhizomes converge. Tyler's agenda is to both rewrite history and to be acknowledged by History. The two are, of course, related, for in his endeavour to reconstitute "natural and primitive" masculinity back into temporality, he is functioning in the capacity of a god-like individual whose contribution should become a historical culmination point. As the new God and father, Tyler demands nothing less than total abjection from his potential adherents: "The lower you fall, the higher you'll fly. The farther you run, the more God wants you back" (141). From an existentialist viewpoint, Tyler's desire to be the new and primal father is a reconfiguration of his being-in-itself as well. To be witnessed by History is to conjoin his "I" with History's "eye", resulting in a transcendental merging of the self with the Big Other. His being-for-itself will no longer be limited by his being-in-itself for in this metaphysical state, the two are finally merged. If Tyler achieves this state of equilibrium, his existential dilemma will be put to rest once and for all. That in the narrative the narrator seems to be unconscious for longer periods so that Tyler has more activity time is suggestive of such a potential but nihilistic conclusion. But it comes to an abrupt end when the Narrator finally "awakens" to the realisation that Tyler and he are one person (167 – 8).

Fight club began with a fisticuff between the Narrator and his alter ego. After losing his home, the Narrator goes to "live" with Tyler in a dilapidated building on Paper Street; and soon after this, Tyler makes a strange request: "I want you to hit me as hard as you can" (46). From this initial "fight", it soon caught enough attention for a club to be formed. But this fight is really a sadomasochistic performance because the Narrator and Tyler are each other's double. In Freud's essay, "The Economic Problem of Masochism", the concept of "moral masochism" is actually better termed, in Jean Laplanche's view, as sadomasochism. Freud sees this form of masochism as related to a (male) patient's enduring desire to be simultaneously punished by a father-figure, and to have passive sexual relations with him. The moral masochist, in other words, takes on a feminine position (Freud, 1924: 424). This experience is, of course, vicarious because the patient is not the one being beaten; it is someone else (usually a sibling) whose beating is being witnessed by him. For Laplanche, however, the witness – the "I/eye" – registers the beating as a sexual fantasy which he "must in a second moment attempt to master, *at once* symbolise and repress" (Laplanche: 212, author's emphasis). Laplanche's rereading of "moral masochism" reveals that the "I" does not only vicariously desire punishment/sexual passivity, but also harbours the fantasy of being the punisher/sexually assertive party as well. In other words, both sadism and masochism – or sadomasochism – are involved in this act of witnessing. Undoubtedly, a degree of narcissistic homosexuality is also involved in such a mechanism because sadomasochism simultaneously "preserves" the father within the self through an unconscious homoerotic establishment, and divests the self from the authority of the father by substituting the latter with the (now punishing) self. This schizophrenic configuration is effectively captured in the Narrator/Tyler split. The Narrator (the passive party) and Tyler (the active one) are the self-same sadomasochist. Leo Bersani argues that masochism is a "solution to the dysfunctional sequence of human maturation" which chooses "extinction" as the logical escape from the sequence

(Bersani: 41). This view is tenable if Freud's theory is correct, because it suggests an eclipsing of the self to privilege the father-figure. But as Laplanche has shown, sadomasochism (which involves a degree of masochism) is actually a self-preservative strategy that indirectly recuperates the diminishing father (cf. Deleuze: 16). As Suzanne Stewart aptly states, (sado)masochism is a "*novel form of self control*" (Stewart: 10, author's emphasis). In *Fight Club*, the Narrator can remain both the child and the father through his alter ego. He can remain his passive, inconsequential self, while living out a redolently masculine and muscularised existence on an unconscious, but equally real, level.

It is only a logical progression from fight club to Project Mayhem. By this time, the Narrator has more or less subscribed to Tyler's belief that it is not further progress (or "self-improvement") that will save men and civilisation, but "self-destruction" (49). When enough fight clubs have been established throughout the country, Tyler moves into his next phase of dismantling temporality in order to place himself as the forerunner of a reconstructed history. And because his personal philosophy promotes the negation of the self in order to transcend, his political one would necessarily follow suit. Project Mayhem targets the various symbols of civilisation such as the Rockefeller Centre, the Space Needle, and the city's skyscrapers (124) because they stand to remind the men of their emasculated status. The Narrator informs that "the goal of Project Mayhem had nothing to do with other people. Tyler didn't care if other people got hurt or not [including his own[24]]. The goal was to teach each man in the project that *he had the power to control history*. We, each of us, can take control of the world" (122, my emphasis). Here again, the notion of transcendence is evocative in Tyler's concept. For a man to control history (and directly, his destiny), he must first admit to his own void. This echoes y Gasset's argument that "Man is an infinite plastic entity of which one mat make what one will precisely because of itself it is *nothing* save only the mere

[24] One of Tyler's men, Robert Poulson, or Big Bob, dies while carrying out a mission.

potentiality to be 'as you like'" (y Gasset: 131, my emphasis). Tyler's primary intention is to break down the cultural accretion that has prevented men from exerting their "true" selves; when he has succeeded in this, the next step is to assemble the men for a large scale terrorist war on contemporary culture and civilisation in order to "save the world" (125). As Tyler announces, "Project Mayhem will force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for earth to recover" (125). But from what exactly does Tyler want earth to recover? The raw energy that infuses Tyler's proclamation certainly suggests a hyper-masculine agenda that is violent and destructive. For him, contemporary civilisation has become corrupted by a strong feminine presence, and recovery from this is nothing short of reinvigorating the superiority of the masculine position once again. As such, Project Mayhem is not only about undoing civilisation, but it is a gender war as well.

When the Narrator finally realises that Tyler is really a figment of his imagination, he is momentarily thrown into confusion. He cannot be certain as to who is *really* real. He cannot decide if Tyler is his alter ego, or if he is Tyler's:

> Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He's a disassociative personality disorder. A psychological fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination.
>
> "Fuck this shit," Tyler says. "Maybe you're my schizophrenic hallucination."
>
> I was here first.
>
> Tyler says, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, well let's just see who's here last."
>
> This isn't real. This is a dream, and I'll wake up.
>
> "Then wake up."
>
> And then the telephone's ringing, and Tyler's gone.
>
> Sun is coming through the curtains.
>
> It's my 7 A.M wake-up call, and when I pick up the receiver, the line is dead. (168)

At this stage, Tyler's reality seems more certain than the Narrator's. The text is also deliberately ambivalent, reinforcing the confusion. That the telephone line goes dead after the Narrator picks it up suggests that, contrary to what he thinks, he may not be asleep at all, and that Tyler is as real as himself, if not more real. So subtle has Tyler "taken over" the Narrator's consciousness that the latter only realises his dire situation when it is more or less too late. Curiously, the Narrator's dilemma represents what René Girard sees in the double split that "beyond a certain threshold, the truly libidinal element of desire will in turn desert the object and become invested in the rival" (Girard: 54). The Narrator subsequently tries to reverse Tyler's damage, but because Tyler is his alter ego, Tyler has already second guessed what the Narrator may try to do to stop him, and has effectively blocked any such possibilities. In the end, the Narrator realises that there is only one way to stop Tyler, and that is to destroy his source of existence – himself. This is a Gothic resolution to the dilemma of the double, for the lesson that the Gothic teaches is that the subject that is split into self and double will invariably be destroyed, dissolving both (cf. MacAndrew: 209 – 13). In *Fight Club* however, the resolution is not so neat.

Several critics have argued that the solution offered by the narrative undermines its otherwise serious criticism against postmodern culture (cf. Palladino and Young, Duncan). They argue that the writers (both Palahniuk and Fincher, that is) are unable to carry through their ideological argument, and must resort to a psychological justification for the Narrator/Tyler's brief reign of terror. The Narrator is redeemed precisely by demonising Tyler and his project. In my opinion however, the narrative's denouement is more ambiguous that this. Part of the reason why the novel cannot resolve itself in Tyler's revolutionary favour is because it may not actually be censuring postmodernism after all, but is, ironically, a criticism of an obsolete ideology that nevertheless continues to assert itself dangerously into the present. I say this because *Fight Club* is explicitly a postmodern text both

in its pastiche-like construction and it is irreverence towards conventions. If this argument is tenable, what the narrative reveals then is the *fantastic* quality of the historical construction of masculinity that continues to situate men in crisis. Historically, "real" men were invested with characteristics such as confidence, brute-strength, aggression and intelligence – all of which Tyler embodies – and men who do not manifest such qualities are wanting. But in the narrative, the fact that Tyler is really the Narrator's imagination suggest hat the image of the "real" man is ultimately a fantasy. What the Narrator idealises is fundamentally impossible, which results in him being "Deprived of even [his] most intimate 'subjective' experience, the way things 'really seems to me', that of the fundamental fantasy which constitutes and guarantees the core of [his] being, since [he] can never consciously experience and assume it" (Žižek: 84). This deprivation results in schizophrenia as a mode of resistance against the process of symbolic emasculation initiated by postmodern culture. Tyler's overt violence is evident of a desperate and concrete attempt to rejuvenate a fantasy that is fundamentally unattainable.

Another reason for the Narrator's failure at reclaiming his masculinity through his Tyler is because the latter is created out of the Narrator's narcissistic tendency for self-preservation. But based on Freud's argument, narcissism is ultimately the inability to reject the mother, which means that the creation of Tyler is really due to a *maternal longing*. When the alter ego's hyper-masculinity ultimately endangers the feminine within, and directly, the narcissistic self, it must be relinquished. This reinstatement of the maternal is more obvious in the film version when, in the final scene, the Narrator and Marla's relationship is re-established. What this suggests is that the Narrator has chosen Marla (who is also a maternal representation) over Tyler, and thus, will survive the ordeal because he is now safe once again. Which may suggest why, when the narrator shoots himself in the head, he manages to "kill" Tyler, and, miraculously, not himself (205).

The novel however, provides a radically different conclusion. Upon regaining consciousness after attempted suicide, the Narrator finds himself in a mental home. But even here, Tyler's reach is evident. On one hand, this can be interpreted as another ironic criticism of a form of masculinity that is fundamentally untenable in the postmodern century, and whose insistence is either a madness or an embarrassment that is best kept secreted away in some safe place (like an asylum). On the other hand however, such an interpretation is constantly troubled by an insidious and subtly assertion of a Tyler-esque agenda that cannot seem to die. This reverses the initial irony. The Narrator observes that "every once in a while, somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches, and he says: 'We miss you Mr Durden' …. 'Everything's going according to plan' … 'We're going to break up civilisation so we can make something better of the world' … 'We look forward to getting you back'" (208). One begins to wonder if the Narrator's self-shooting and incarceration in a madhouse is really part of Tyler's plan after all. One also wonders if Tyler has not, indeed, completely taken over the Narrator's psyche, leaving only a remnant consciousness of the latter. When the Narrator says that he does not "want to go back [into society] yet. *Not yet*" (207, my emphasis), it is no longer certain who the speaker is. Tyler may not be dead after all, but merely biding his time before another revolution.

The war that Tyler wants to fight is predominantly a gender one, disguised as a salvific mission to redeem men from their disillusionment. It is not only on the level of the personal and the historical that such a gendered trajectory is played out, but on a geopolitical one as well. The narrative implicitly feminises the postmodern landscape in order to foreground the (hyper)masculine struggles of the Narrator and Tyler. Tyler concocts a philosophical justification which is largely premised on existentialism for his work, but heavily "muscularises" it. It is interesting that Tyler appears the moment the Narrator finds himself attracted to a woman, which would deepen his dependence on the feminine. As

Tyler, the Narrator can both have the woman, and disengage himself from her to pursue a larger purpose. The only person who can stop Tyler in the end is the Narrator himself. But from the discussion above, it is difficult to say whether or not this is accomplished. There is a possibility that Tyler has completely taken over the Narrator's consciousness, and is merely awaiting another opportune moment to activate his next phase, whatever it may be.

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On Palahniuk's *Haunted*

Calum Kerr

A book of twenty-three short stories, a collection of twenty-one poems and a novel published on the same day? It seems for a moment as though Chuck Palahniuk is trying to be as prolific as a Stephen King or a Barbara Cartland and then you realise that this is only one volume. *Haunted* is the latest book from Chuck Palahniuk and as ever the intricacies of its structure and narration are at least as important as the stories being told. From the short disjointed chapters of *Fight Club*, through the 'black-box recording' of *Survivor*, to the somewhat more self-explanatory format of *Diary*, Palahniuk has always stamped his novels with a structure that gives him the greatest ability to control the reader's experience and provide the shocks and twists which have become his trademark. In this way he is able to reflect the fragmented lives of his characters in the seemingly random juxtaposition of event with event.

Haunted is no exception. Neatly sectioned up, each of his cast of grotesques is featured in the ongoing narrative before they are ushered in with an introductory poem and allowed to tell us a story. Each of these characters is identified by their nickname: the Duke of Vandals, Comrade Snarky, Lady Baglady, the Matchmaker and Saint Gut-Free. These nicknames serve as a signpost leading to the stories these characters want to tell. If nothing else, this is a book about stories and those who tell them.

The main narrative which runs through *Haunted* is ostensibly the tale of a group of writers going on retreat. The mysterious and enigmatic leader of the group, Mr Whittier, has convinced each of the characters to leave their lives, leaving behind notes which range from polite messages propped by the kettle to spray-painted messages across bus-shelters, and to deliver themselves into his hands for three months. In these months he promises that they will find the isolation and freedom from the world and from themselves

to be able to write their stories. Of course, being Palahniuk, nothing is quite what it seems, and the whole scheme barely gets off the ground before things start to go awry. Once again we see that no matter how hard his characters try to find isolation, they can never escape from themselves.

As the story of the group and their retreat unfolds, we are introduced one by one to each of the characters and this is where Palahniuk hits his stride. Each writer tells us his or her story, but these are no fictional affairs, no screenplay ideas which will make a million bucks. These are the stories behind each character, the reasons for their nicknames - Baroness Frostbite, Chef Assassin, Miss America, Miss Sneezy and the Missing Link - and the reason why each of them would be willing to leave their lives to spend three months with a group of strangers and an old man who promises to change their lives. They are the stories of how the Saint became gut-free, how a lady became a baglady and why the young woman is so sneezy. These are the stories which Palahniuk revels in telling us in all of his books. They are the willing members of Project Mayhem from *Fight Club* looking in the mirror and telling themselves 'I am the all-singing, all-dancing crap of this world' (169). They are Shannon MacFarland and Brandy Alexander from *Invisible Monsters* with only a single face to share. They are Peter Wilmot from *Diary* hiding his word-filled bile in walled-off rooms.

We have been here before, but it has never been so succinct or overt. The free-flowing style that characterises Palahniuk's writing is very much in evidence, but the repetitive motifs which mark - and sometimes marr - his writing are largely reserved for the poems, freeing the narrative to be individuated for each voice.

Again, as with his previous works, the main theme which Palahniuk explores in the book is the self-disgust of human beings for themselves and their actions. However, with the use of the increasingly fragmented structure in this text he manages to expand it to include the whole species rather than simply his chosen cast of characters.

This is not to say that Palahniuk always pulls it off. The use of the individual characters' stories serve to obscure the lack of any substantial greater plot, but they cannot hide it altogether. The narrative on which he hangs his poems and stories is little more than an insubstantial novella and while they are as interesting as any side-show oddities, there is little to forge a connection with the reader and little emotional investment in the outcome. Ultimately, it is a book of unrelated stories and the title, *Haunted*, is apt enough as each of them - Mother Nature, the Earl of Slander, Director Denial, and the Reverend Godless - tell us about the events which haunt them, but it is rarely more than that. As with any collection of short short-stories the emphasis is largely on events rather than character. In many cases, the reader is left unsure if the character's stories are meant to be fact or fiction within the context of the world of the book, and so the emotional connection which could come from the confessional sharing of life-changing events is lost.

Ever since the publication of *Fight Club* in 1996, Palahniuk seems to have been trying to find his way back to the simple hard edge of nihilism that characterised that book. The stories in *Haunted* show some flashes of what made *Fight Club* such an entrancing debut, but ultimately the complexity of the structure and the constant deviation into story after story blunt this edge. Palahniuk seems to be aware of this lack as he strives harder and harder to shock the reader. His writing in this book is perhaps more graphic and involves more sexual, social, moral and emotional perversity than any of his previous books. It is at times undoubtedly shocking, but it does also feel, at times, as though shock is being substituted for substance.

This is, however, a Palahniuk book, and if there was no shock and no perversity, it would be a fundamental disappointment. Held up against the concise slice of anger and nihilism that made up *Fight Club*, any books will look fat and sloppy in comparison. This is a fascinating and intriguing read in which each of the characters - Sister Vigilante, Agent Tattletale,

the Countess Foresight and Mrs Clark - act as mouthpieces for Palahniuk to find new ways to expose the problems of the human condition as it exists at the beginning of the 21st Century. His anger and his disgust have not been blunted and his sheer level of invention should put most writers to shame.

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A Selected Bibliography of Chuck Palahniuk

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