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FATHER, GOD AND TYLER'S GHOST:
FIGHT CLUB AS MASCULINE QUEST AND POSTMODERN PASTICHE

by

CLINT DAVID TESSENDORF
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FIGHT CLUB AS MASCULINE QUEST AND POSTMODERN PASTICHE

by

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of the requirements for the award of the degree of
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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any
degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this
dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been
cited and referenced using the Author-Date convention.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: 13/6/2008
We’re designed to be hunters and we’re in a society of shopping. There’s nothing to kill anymore, there’s nothing to fight, nothing to overcome, nothing to explore. In that societal emasculation this everyman is created.
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**Cover Plate** – Image from *Film Comment*, 35 (5) : 59, featuring a quote by David Fincher.
Abstract

This study seeks to account for the numerous ways critics in reviews, magazine articles, journal articles and books have interpreted David Fincher's *Fight Club*. It also seeks to account for growing appeal of the film even though it was initially described as a failure at the box-office. The film clearly engages with many provocative ideas, leading to the many ways it has been interpreted. This exploration is facilitated through an exploration of the various labels that have been placed on the film and investigates to what extent the film manages to provide a coherent message beyond its mixed bag of 'hip' allusions.

To navigate through this collection of ideas, this study explores the film as a postmodern text, utilising the work of Fredric Jameson, Jean-François Lyotard and Linda Hutcheon. This exploration is guided by a quote from David Fincher that states that on the path to enlightenment you have to overcome three dominant figures: your parents, your god and your teacher. This 'path to enlightenment' is then shown to be a regressive quest for a lost traditional masculinity. This forms the framework of the study.

The study first looks at the film's narrator: his lack of a name, the environment he finds himself in, the way this environment and the subject are depicted as sublime and his relation to death.

It then looks at the protagonist's relationship with the first dominant figure, his father, and how this impacts upon his relationship to the female sex and his own sexuality. This investigation also highlights contiguities with Sam Mendes' *American Beauty*. 
It then moves on to an investigation of the two remaining dominant figures, the protagonist's God and his teacher, Tyler. This section also investigates in detail the way that Tyler has been described by critics, specifically as a Nietzschean übermensch and Jungian shadow. It also investigates Tyler's political agenda, looking directly at his teaching of basic Marxist and Anarchist theory.

Finally, the study investigates the aesthetic aspects of the film as a whole as well as its aestheticization of violence and its links to Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull*.

The author finds that the film falls short of being a revolutionary text that comprehensively executes any of the radical ideas it posits. It rather functions as a postmodern pastiche of 'hip' ideas layered over a retrogressive masculine journey narrative.
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I would like to dedicate this to my gran, Polly Tessendorf, a woman of unquestionable strength and character, and the person who through her daily behaviour showed me the true meaning of hard work and dedication. Thank you.
Reader's Note

All dialogue quoted from films has been personally transcribed, rather than reproduced from official scripts.

The article and interview from DVD Monthly as well as the Animal Spirits Homepage are uncredited and are therefore referenced according to article name and page number.

As is customary, references to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche are listed according to paragraph number and not page number.

For the sake of fluency, directors’ names have been listed in the Filmography instead of in-text, with only the date being listed the first time the film is cited.

References to the DVD commentary refer to the standard director’s commentary, featuring the director and principle actors available on the initial DVD release and all subsequent re-releases.
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Introduction

I wonder, madam, that you have not penetration enough to see the strong inducement to this excess; for he who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.

- Dr. Samuel Johnson

Eight years after its initial release, people are still attempting to come to terms with David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999). The March 2007 issue of *DVD Monthly* featured Tyler Durden on the cover, a full-page review and a six-page article to mark the re-release of the film as part of the ‘Definitive Edition’ series. Both the re-release and the fact that magazines are still running extensive commentaries on the film shows remarkable interest in a film that is regarded as having failed at the box office: “*Fight Club* was a flop. Upon its cinematic release it received decidedly mixed reviews and made only $37 million dollars in the US, only a little over half its production budget” (*DVD Monthly*, March 2007: 32). Some maintain that this was as a result of mixed reviews and critics ‘just not getting it’ (*DVD Monthly*, March 2007: 33).

While the first rule of *Fight Club* might be that “You do not talk about *Fight Club*”, it appears that everyone had something to say about this provocative film and a label to apply to it, with written material still piling up. While Alexander Walker called it “fascist” (a term also used by both Ebert, 1999 and Hunter, 1999) a nazi allegory and “anti-God” (1999: 29), Christopher Deacy (2002) and Stefanie Remlinger (2001) called it a Christian allegory. When it came to sexuality, Susan Faludi called it “quasi-feminist” (1999) while Amy Taubin (1999), Charles Whitehouse (1999) and Henry Giroux (2002) called it ‘homoerotic.’ Thomas Peele called it “heteronormative” (2001: 868) and Roger Ebert called it “macho porn” (1999). Critics have also been divided about its depiction of
violence. Stefanie Remlinger wrote that the violence is “neither gratuitous nor set up as a model to emulate” (2001: 142) while Roger Ebert called it is “a celebration of violence” (1999) and Mick Martin and Marsha Porter called it a “grotesque and interminable endurance test” for serial killers and those suffering from road rage (2006: 382). Fight Club’s relation to capitalism is another contested field, with some writers completely buying into what Walker sees as the film’s ‘radical’ politics (1999) while others discount it as a domesticated suburban squabble (Tomlinson, 1999; Diken & Laustsen, 2001; Giroux, 2002).

Numerous other labels have also been applied to the film, notably film noir (Lindsay, 2003; Diken & Laustsen, 2001), and numerous writers linked it to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and/or Carl Jung (Taubin, 1999; Smith, 1999; Fuller, 1999; Ebert, 1999; Whitehouse, 1999; O’Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2002; Rothe-Kushel, 2002; Gronstad, 2003). Critics also tend to compare it with American Beauty (1999) (Faludi, 1999; Maslin, 1999; Hunter, 1999; Schwarzbaum, 1999; Arthur, 2000; Crowdus, 2000; Deacy, 2002; Gronstad, 2003), which came out in the same year, and the films of Martin Scorsese (Johnson, 1999; Taubin, 1999; Deacy, 2002; Gronstad, 2003). This array of opinion displays both the amount that has been said about the film as well as the often contradictory ways it has been interpreted.

Generally centring on topics of masculinity, violence and politics, these discussions have critics taking up radically opposite positions in a show of extremism that appears to be encouraged by the film’s apparently radical messages, with critics and viewers either disliking the film intensely or praising it just as eagerly. In another show of extremism, there are also a few accounts of publications drastically adjusting their
reviews of the film after noting its growing cult status. *Entertainment Weekly* is recorded as lifting its review from a D grading to ‘the number one DVD to own’ (*DVD Monthly*, March 2007: 33), while others, such as Martin and Porter’s yearly *DVD & Video Guide* have stuck to their rating of a turkey, the lowest grade they assign (2006: 382).

Nevertheless, the DVD format proved to be the film’s saviour, and apparently vice versa: “Along with *The Matrix, Fight Club* became one of the most important ambassadors for the DVD format and the result was that purely due to disc sales, the film made a tidy profit” (*DVD Monthly*, March 2007: 33). Jim Uhls, *Fight Club*’s screenwriter, recounts how “in the first day on sale on DVD and video it made the same amount of money as it did on its first weekend at the cinema, which was pretty amazing, and then it kept going” (*DVD Monthly*, March 2007: 37). Sales of the DVD have been so impressive that it has been re-released twice since then - first there was ‘The Collector’s Edition’ released in 2000 and then ‘The Definitive Edition,’ which was released in 2007. Each edition has boasted more extras and commentaries than its predecessor, while the most recent edition also features the restoration of censored footage initially cut.

Along with sales, written material on the film has also been increasing in everything from magazine articles and online blogs, to journal articles and books. Major contributions have since come from the academic journal *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*, which published four articles on the film during 2001, Henry Giroux’s articles in journals and in his book, *Breaking in to the Movies* (2002), from Asbjorn Gronstad’s article in *Film Criticism* (2003) and various publications by Slavoj Žižek (2003). Each contribution inadvertently addresses issues such as the film’s violence and depiction of macho masculinity. Writers also continually attempt to address the many visual
conundrums and intertextual references that abound in the film. The article in *DVD Monthly* also has sections dedicated to the various myths that have surfaced about the film over the years since its release. These include that it is set in the future, that its bomb recipes are real and that it is homosexual, while also grappling with the strange appearance of the penguin, its apparent misogyny and a hidden reference to Ira Gershwin’s brain tumour (2007: 34-5). Enquiries such as these continue almost a decade after the film’s initial release as writers continually attempt to come to terms with what has been described as “one of the most complex big star movies of recent years” (*DVD Monthly*, March 2007: 33) and without a doubt David Fincher’s most controversial undertaking to date.

By the time Fincher made *Fight Club* he had already developed an *oeuvre* of highly aesthetic consumerist pieces. He cut his teeth working on the special effects cinematography for *Star Wars Episode IV - Return of the Jedi* (1983), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and *The Neverending Story* (1984) and also shot music videos for Madonna, Michael Jackson, the Rolling Stones and television commercials for Nike, Levi’s, Pepsi and Coke. Thereafter, he made his feature film debut with *Alien 3* (1992), a film he now makes a concerted effort to distance himself from due to his loss of creative control of the project, and followed it with the edgy crime thrillers *Seven* (1995) and *The Game* (1997). At this point Fincher decided to make *Fight Club* from Jim Uhls’ screenplay of Chuck Palahniuk’s best-selling novel. He has since followed *Fight Club* with the period/crime/docu-drama *Zodiac* (2007), again about crime and male violence. While his ‘commercial’ work can sometimes be seen as controversial, and his feature films have been commercially successful genre films, *Fight Club* sees his commercial
and adventurous tendencies come into direct conflict in a film that tends to defy genre classification by being visually and thematically alternative and yet commercially successful.

Looking at the film a number of questions arise: Does the film provide a radical view of masculinity? Does it advocate violence and damage to property? Does it actually align itself with any of the political or philosophical views it hints at? Are we supposed to take its apparently revolutionary messages seriously or are we running the risk of being the victims of a director’s ironic sense of humour? Looking at any one aspect of the film can lead to a conclusion that does not necessarily apply to the film as a whole, as there are so many ‘radicalisms’ present that they soon begin to conflict with one another. Many are picked up and then abandoned without being developed to any great extent. This appears to be the result of the film’s ability to remain descriptive aesthetically instead of prescriptive ideologically; its lavish spectacle overshadows its fragile ideology as Fincher begins to emerge as a follower of what Jameson calls “the cult of the glossy image” (1990: 84). My interest centres on whether this film can be seen as radical at all, in any sense. If so, how has it managed to deliver its radical message as palatable and even attractive to such a large audience? The exploration of these and related questions will determine to what extent the film manages to provide a coherent message beyond its flashy exterior or whether it merely contains an attractive mixed bag of ‘hip’ ideas.

The manner best suited to accounting for the film’s complexity, and its contradictory nature, is to begin by looking at the film as a postmodern text. In attempting to come to terms with postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon writes:
In general terms it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or ‘highlight,’ and to subvert, or ‘subvert,’ and the mode is therefore a ‘knowing’ and an ironic – or even ‘ironic’ – one. Postmodernism’s distinctive character lies in the wholesale ‘nudging’ commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presupposition it appears to challenge. (1989: 1-2)

This perspective begins to shed light on Fincher’s apparent ambiguity and the disparate readings by various critics. However, as Hutcheon’s last sentence indicates, the process of double-coding and playful intertextuality inevitably results in reinforcing certain codes along the way. She continues:

Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to say that the postmodern’s initial concern is to denaturalise some of the dominant features of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact ‘cultural’; they are made by us, not given to us. (1989: 2)

So while it is the postmodern text’s aim is to denaturalise and question cultural norms, it inadvertently reinforces others, such as patriarchy or capitalism. The task of this analysis is to separate those aspects the film manages to subvert from those it manages to reinforce. This study will argue that while Fight Club successfully problematises and questions many aspects of contemporary life, the one that it does not manage to interrogate in a comprehensive way is the traditional masculine journey it creates for its protagonist, a retrogressive masculine experience which it merely reinforces and underlies the film as a whole.

Other concerns the film addresses, however, obscure the core concern of the narrator’s quest for an authentically masculine subjectivity. The vast number of
influences and references in the film result in it forming a postmodern pastiche. Fredric Jameson describes pastiche as

the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter, and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. (1991: 17)

In a medium such as film, pastiche can, however, also be used in a more diverse manner than in its more established fields of architecture and literature. Pastiche in film allows for references to previous film styles, but it also allows references to modes of thought that include political ideologies, religious doctrine and philosophical theory that can be superficially (through visual devices or any other) referenced and integrated into the narrative. This practice, along with postmodernism's encouragement of different subject positions and various interpretations of the same text, adds to the effect of the 'death of the author' (Barthes, 1988), or in this case, the director. As Jameson states, "The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, and the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche" (1991: 16).

Postmodernism constitutes much more than just pastiche though. This is evident in Ihab Hassan's (1986) description of what he sees as the eleven features of postmodernism. His list includes 'indeterminacy' and 'uncertainty,' 'fragmentation,' 'decanonization' (which includes the 'death of the father,' 'death of god' and 'death of the author'), the 'self-less-ness' and 'depth-less-ness' of the subject, 'hybridization' or the 'mutant' replication of genres, including parody, travesty and pastiche,
‘carnivalization,’ and the text’s invitation of performance and participation as it wants to be written, revised, answered and acted out (1986: 504-7).

While many of these aspects will be looked at throughout this analysis, Hassan’s inclusion of the ‘death of the father,’ ‘death of god’ and ‘death of the author’ under ‘decanonization’ is particularly notable because it is strikingly similar to a reference by Fincher. Interviewing Fincher, Gavin Smith asked, “What did you set out to do with this film?” Fincher answered, “I don’t know if it’s Buddhism, but there’s the idea that on the path to enlightenment you have to kill your parents, your god and your teacher” (1999: 60). Fincher then goes on to describe this as the trajectory of the film (Smith, 1999: 60). The phrase actually stems from Zen Buddhism and can be traced back to the teachings of contemporary Zen Master, Seung Sahn in ‘The Medicine Buddha’ (1991). Besides mapping out the main narrative drive of the film, this quotation also highlights the director’s offhand use of religious references. Fincher continues on to describe how the killing off of these three figures, and the film as a whole, is “about the process of maturing” (Smith, 1999: 60). He describes how, if the male subject is to reach maturity, he must confront and overcome elements that are representative of the patriarchal nuclear family, spirituality and mentoring figures (Smith, 1999: 60). As the narrator walks the path towards maturity he is forced to confront his own development, as well as the way certain dominant figures and institutions still hold authority over him.

This study will also require a basic understanding of Lyotard’s description of postmodernism as an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (1984: xxiv). Explaining this in relation to modernism, he writes:
I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii)

Postmodernism, in contrast, displays an ‘incredulity’ toward these ‘grand narrative’ exploits, and shows a deep-seated scepticism of the “hero of knowledge [who] works toward a good ethico-political end – universal peace” (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). Lyotard continues to describe the contemporary narrative as “losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyagers, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements” (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). One of the reasons he sees for this shift is “the redeployment of advanced liberal capitalism” (Lyotard, 1984: 38).

Through Lyotard’s description, we can see that postmodernism’s insistence on an ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ and the way postmodernism has discarded the ‘hero of knowledge’ with his ‘great voyages and goals’ in favour of ‘clouds of narrative elements’ with a shift in focus from ‘the ends of actions to their means’ allows for a text like *Fight Club* to emerge, one with clouds of allusions and a deeply fragmented subject with no apparent sense of direction or clearly demarcated goal.

I will also, however, be arguing that while *Fight Club* can be seen as a progressive postmodernist text in some regards, it contemporaneously posits a decidedly retrogressive view of masculinity that appears to be very dated and stereotypic. To come to terms with this, it is useful to look back on an influential thinker in the field of Men’s Studies, Jonathan Rutherford. In his article, ‘Who’s That Man?’ (1988), he writes: “I have become aware how heterosexual men have inherited a language which can define the lives and sexualities of others, but fails us when we have to deal with our own
heterosexuality and masculine identities” (1988: 22). Rutherford is attempting to account for the way heterosexuality has been able to establish itself as a stable centre, from which other positions can be categorised as ‘other,’ as different from that which is ‘normal.’ David Buchbinder has reiterated this sentiment by describing masculinity as “self evident, natural, universal; above all unitary and whole, not multiple or divided” (1994: 1).

Rutherford writes that ‘normal sexuality’ has been “both beyond question and beyond description: women may be sexual beings, homosexuals are, but men are just chaps, the lads. Our language doesn’t produce us as sexual objects or a category in need of a label” (1988: 22). This lack of ‘language’ can be seen as the result of a power dynamic that asserts its dominance and superiority over those who lack this central position of male heterosexuality:

The dominance of heterosexual masculinity, the ideologies that have supported it by silencing the experience of others, the power structures and privileges that it disguises, the active, daily subordination of women and gay men, the persecution of effeminate men, and the racism of men’s colonial legacy … It is an identity that is in continual struggle to assert its centrality in cultural life, yet it attempts to evade becoming the object of discourse. … The myth of masculinity is its attempt to pass itself off as neutral and universal, free of problems. (Rutherford, 1988: 22-3)

So it is necessary to understand that the position of heterosexual male power, in effect, relies upon its invisibility to retain its dominance. As long as it is unquestioned, it can recline in its position of superiority and dominance.

However, as soon as it is questioned, and forced to become visible, heterosexual masculinity displays its fragile foundations:
Today the masculine myth is being sufficiently questioned to drag it into view. ... The weakening of particular masculine identities has pushed them into the spotlight of greater public scrutiny. The reality of men’s heterosexual identities is that their endurance is contingent upon an array of structures and institutions. When these shift or weaken, men’s dominant positions are threatened. The past decade has seen such a crisis. (Rutherford, 1988: 23)

This ‘questioning’ has mainly been directed by three branches of critical theory: various women’s movements under the heading of feminism, queer theory and race studies. Having at first been occupied with validating their own positions in society and theoretical discourse, these theoretical approaches are now able to question the position from which they have received the most resistance. Rutherford writes:

These are languages [those resulting from the women’s movement, radical gay and black politics] that have produced new meanings for their own constituencies, but they have also produced descriptions of the dominant masculinity, that contest its myth and force it into view. Yet despite this oppositional language and the assertiveness of the new political constituencies, heterosexual men have remained remarkably silent in the face of this unmasking and criticism. ... Exposed to a growing questioning men have used their silence as the best form of retaining the status quo, in the hope that the ideological formations that once sustained the myth of masculine infallibility will resurrect themselves from the fragments and produce a new mythology to hide us in. (1988: 25)

David Buchbinder moves beyond these direct attacks to identify other threats to hegemonic masculinity as well. He includes the threats posed by HIV/AIDS, homosexuality and bisexuality (Buchbinder, 1994: 1) as well as the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1950s and 1960s (Buchbinder, 1994: 12). The hippie movement was also seen as a threat with its return to “a gentler ideology” (Buchbinder, 1994: 12). The youth started calling for ‘flower power’: “an effort was made to blur sexual difference by a ‘unisex’ creed, articulated especially through fashion in hairstyles and clothing” (Buchbinder, 1994: 12). Hegemonic masculinity also had to contend with two world wars, which on
the one hand reinforced traditional masculinity by "allow[ing] men to display masculine qualities such as courage, fortitude, endurance, stoicism and sheer physical strength" (Buchbinder, 1994: 8) while at the same time "requiring women to take on responsibilities and roles that hitherto had been the province of men" (Buchbinder, 1994: 8) which threatened them when they returned. Financially, the Great Depression of 1929 also threatened the traditional role of men as breadwinners: "men of the 1930s felt themselves to be less than 'real' men if they could not find jobs" (Buchbinder, 1994: 11).

Rutherford saw two reactions to the threats posed to traditional masculinity: the 'Retributive Man' and the 'New Man.' The 'New Man' is described as the "expression of the repressed body of masculinity. It is a fraught and uneven attempt to express masculine emotional and sexual life" (Rutherford, 1988: 32). Buchbinder expands on this description, describing him as "gentler and less aggressive ... in touch with his feelings.... Such a man is very different obviously, from the aggressive, self contained, independent man whom our culture tends traditionally to associate with the idea of masculinity" (1994: 2). This position can be seen as a direct response to the 'assertiveness' of feminism, one that allows for an overtly image-conscious position that encompasses aspects such as clothing and fatherhood, giving rise to the 'New Father.' This man is sensitive and caring: "He looks soft and gentle and, what’s more, he’s not afraid to show it" (Rutherford, 1988: 34) and is not afraid of looking "domesticated, feminised or paternal" (Nelmes, 2003: 269). The new man is to be found in film genres such as comedies and romances during the late 1980s and early 1990s, in films such as *Three Men and a Baby* (1987) and *Parenthood* (1989).
In strong contrast to this emotional and sensitive masculinity, Rutherford posits the ‘Retributive Man.’ He is described as representing “the struggle to reassert a traditional masculinity, a tough independent authority” (1988: 28). He cites examples such as Rambo as an illustration of this position in the media. This position relies on a traditional sense of masculinity through macho dominance and violence. Violence appears to be intrinsically linked to this position as defence against the attacks levelled against it from various fronts, including feminism, race and gender studies: “Violence is a common response when masculine identities are under threat” (Rutherford, 1988: 29). Jill Nelmes describes how “[t]he 1980s action hero is superficially a sign of masculine power, but on closer examination an anxiety about masculine identity is revealed, an anxiety which has been addressed in many films of the 1990s although in rather different forms” (2003: 269).

Traditional depictions of masculine violence have generally been represented in military situations and war. However, the role men started playing in these types of movies began to change from the 1980s onward. In examples such as Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985) and more recent incarnations such as the recent remake of 1973s Walking Tall (2004), starring Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson (of WWE wrestling fame), and The Marine (2007), with John Cena (also from WWE), the muscle-bound heroes are fighting against authority. These examples show a break from the belief in American government-sanctioned operations and voluntary subjection to the orders of other males. This has given rise to a ‘rogue male’ figure that fights alone. Rutherford describes this emergence of a ‘rogue male’ as representing
a distrust of the traditional class-bound gamesmanship, a belief that the rot has
gone too far, and that the individual man has only himself to rely on for his own,
and for national, salvation. It’s a belief played out in the pursuit of survivalism,
the obsessive concern with apocalypse and the search for self-sufficiency,
learning to kill and live in the wild. (1988: 29)

The concept of the ‘Retributive Man,’ which includes the ‘rogue male,’ shows the search
for an essentialised and lost masculinity, one that is untainted and attains its potency from
physical strength and dominance. He needs to assert it over those he deems ‘other,’ those
he deems un-masculine and, therefore, inferior.

Susan Faludi records a similar sentiment expressed by Sylvester Stallone on his
early roles as Rambo:

“In the previous generation’s ‘action’ films, the westerns and World War II
movies, the male heroes played by men like John Wayne and Kirk Douglas and
Steve McQueen were ‘part of a system’,” Stallone observed; they were “hard
working” and “incredible father figures” who “led an army.” But Stallone’s
generation of action heroes were all alone, “the one-man army,” as he called his
Rambo persona and its knockoffs. “We’re not fighting for America. We’re just
using the backdrop of this country or the American uniform, but it’s personal....
The man, he’s on his own. I have to be my own country. I have to be my own
citadel. No one’s gonna watch my back.” (2000: 585)

This is a masculine position that is aggressive and solitary, without loyalty to anyone but
himself as he follows his own survival instinct.

However, as Faludi records, Sylvester Stallone gives further interesting insight
into his career beyond Rambo and Rocky (1976). On the twentieth anniversary of the first
Rocky, Faludi notes: ‘the actor announced that his action persona had made him feel
“very hollow.” He was sick of being perceived as nothing more than a glob of muscle
mass’ (2000: 581) (the irony here of course is that he has recently reprised his role as
Rocky for Rocky Balboa in 2006). Stallone relates how the weight he had put on for
Copland (1997) had “freed him from a more humiliating fate: that of a man forever before the mirror” (Faludi, 2000: 583). He then goes on to compare the sculpted, muscle-bound male to a conception of femininity:

“The feminine mystique, be it in any shape or form, is apparent,” Stallone told me. “You take a serious gym rat, a man who lives in a gym, it’s like, what do you do with it? You’ve got it, but it comes out in this vanity thing which borders on the world of exotic dancing with women. You qualify for nothing – like the Chippendales dancers... (Faludi, 2000: 583)

The search for a hypermasculine appearance, as muscular as possible, overshadows actual strength. This move from functional strength to a strength aesthetic marks an interesting transition. According to Stallone:

Even more humiliating, he observed, the gym-bred man was pursuing the overwrought “feminine” display at the very moment so many women were rejecting it. “The guy with the eighteen-inch arms, the thirty-one-inch waist, the male model, chiselled, Calvin Klein-ad type of person, he is, for the nineties, the woman with the triple E. He’s taking the place of the blond bombshell of the fifties. And the blond bombshell women, they don’t even do that anymore! The woman on the street doesn’t want to be Jayne Mansfield.” (Faludi, 2000: 583-4)

The possibility therefore exists that the aggressive individualist male, due to his powerful appearance, can lapse into a state of vanity often associated with women. The hypermasculine male becomes the victim of the gaze of others, allowing the desires of others, male and female, to affect the way he sees himself. Stallone shows an awareness of this vanity and ‘backlash’ it has caused for him as he admires the men who built the massive iron bridges he sees and how he wants to take on “workingman’s roles” (Faludi, 2000: 581). Faludi records: “Stallone wanted to be loved for something other than being beautiful; he wanted to defy ornamental culture by making himself ugly” (2000: 582).
At this point it is revealing to introduce aspects of Robert Bly’s book, *Iron John* (1990) to facilitate a link both directly between *Fight Club* and the text specifically, as well as one that looks at *Iron John* as an example of myth. In the place of Rutherford’s ‘Retributive Man’ Bly uses ‘The Wild Man’ (occasionally referred to as the ‘hairy man’) from the story of Iron John set down by the Grimm brothers (1990: 5). Bly posits the ‘Wild Man’ as a response to the ‘soft male’ he sees appearing first in the seventies as a result of excess contact with man’s ‘interior feminine’ (1990: 8).

Bly makes numerous points that are pertinent to an analysis of *Fight Club*; these will be explored thoroughly in due course but need to be listed here. Firstly, in relation to religion, he writes: “The ethical superstructure of popular Christianity does not support the Wild Man” (1990: 8) even though there apparently are some similarities between him and Jesus Christ (1990: 8). He also writes that as the man grows up he is unable to reclaim his masculinity due to various forces. At the age of twenty-five years old the man has “two Toyotas and a mortgage, maybe a wife and a child. How can he let the Wild Man out of the cage?” (1990: 10). Bly also describes how other non-western cultures safeguard their young men’s masculinity. In the Eskimo tradition, the shaman takes the boy away to be initiated, while the old men of the Native American Indian Hopi tribe take a young boy “and bring him down into the all-male area of the kiva” (1990: 14) (author’s emphasis). From these examples, he makes it clear that the involvement of older men is essential: “It’s becoming clear to us that manhood doesn’t happen by itself; it doesn’t happen just because we eat Wheaties. The active intervention of the older men means that older men welcome the younger man into the ancient, mythologized, instinctive male world” (1990: 15). In his section on the ‘remote father,’ Bly looks at how
detrimental it can be if a son does not actually see what his father does everyday, and
how Jung “said that when the son is introduced primarily by the mother to feeling, he will
learn the female attitude toward masculinity and take a female view of his own father and
of his own masculinity” (1990: 24). This sample of the necessary life path Bly describes
as necessary for a balanced and strong masculine identity has many contiguities with the
journey depicted in *Fight Club* and links the narrator’s journey to a regressive move back
to a retributive stance, a step backwards towards the traditional and mythical ‘hairy man’
mentality.

Having outlined this basic theoretical framework, it is now possible to look at
how exactly I will be investigating *Fight Club*. To understand *Fight Club*’s narrator, it is
necessary to first look at his lack of a name, the dislocated environment in which he finds
himself, the way in which this environment and the subject are depicted as sublime, and
his relation to death. These enquiries will constitute the first chapter of this study.

The second chapter will look at the protagonist’s relationship with the first
dominant figure he is required to overcome, his father, and how this impacts his
relationship to the female sex and his own sexuality. At this point it is also useful to take
a look outside of *Fight Club* to a contemporaneous film with which it is often compared,
Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty*.

The third chapter will move onto the other two dominant figures he is required to
overcome, the protagonist’s God and his teacher, Tyler. This section will also look in
detail at the way Tyler has been described by critics, specifically as a Nietzschean
übermensch and Jungian shadow, as well as his political agenda, looking directly at his
teaching of basic Marxist and Anarchist theory.
The last chapter will examine the aesthetic aspects of the film as well as its aestheticisation of violence. Before looking at the way the film finally ends, the film will also be compared to another film it is often linked to in relation to its depiction of male violence and a masculine crisis, Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* (1980).

The investigation of these aspects amounts to an exploration of the major issues raised about the film. It also identifies some links that may not have been discussed by other writers, but could easily emerge as material continues to be produced on the film. This will however require the film to be subjected to considerable scrutiny through numerous critical and cultural lenses. This expansive study in numerous critical directions will result in a thoroughly grounded reading of the film that uses Fincher’s quote concerning the path to maturity as a departure point. This will lead to an understanding of how the film functions and how it falls short of being a revolutionary text, merely functioning as a postmodern pastiche layered over a traditional masculine journey narrative.
Chapter One: The Personal

To begin this study it is necessary to identify the narrator, as he is our entrance into the narrative and the character with whom we are intended to associate. Fincher implements a number of techniques to make this character directly accessible to the viewer by making him an ‘everyman,’ something he readily admits to, with Fight Club “talking about very simple concepts. We’re designed to be hunters and we’re in a society of shopping. There’s nothing to kill anymore, there’s nothing to fight, nothing to overcome, nothing to explore. In that societal emasculation this everyman is created” (Smith, 1999: 61). One of the ways he does this is to leave him nameless. This effectively allows the audience to insert themselves into this subject position without a name impeding this process. Fincher also attempts to facilitate this association by having the character figuratively reborn in front of us. The first part of the narrative has the narrator completely fixated on death and as the narrative develops his old self dies and, with Tyler’s help, he is reborn as a new, enlightened self. This process allows the audience to die with him and be reborn with him into a nameless and past-less state.

As Linda Hutcheon proposes, this destabilisation of the subject is another facet of the postmodern discourse: “postmodernism works both to underline and to undermine the notion of the coherent, self-sufficient subject as the source of meaning or action” (1989: 108-9). This can also be linked to Hassan’s investigation into the ‘self-less-ness’ and ‘depth-less-ness’ of the postmodern subject, linking it back to Nietzsche’s notion of the loss of self in the modern literature: “Losing itself in the play of language, in the differences from which reality is plurally made, the self impersonates its absence even as
death stalks its games. It diffuses itself in depthless styles, refusing, eluding, interpretation” (1986: 505).

The locations also serve to dislocate the narrator, situating him in an undefined postmodern space. This space is also often depicted as sublime, again dislocating it from everyday reality and everyday space.

This look at the elusiveness of the protagonist’s subjectivity in the narrative would also be incomplete without mentioning the casting of its two main leads. By casting Edward Norton and Brad Pitt, Fincher is investing the narrative with two A-list and incredibly attractive Hollywood personalities, but he is also recruiting their histories of playing psychologically complex and sometimes elusive characters. As Richard Dyer states, “Star images are always extensive, multimedia [and] intertextual” (Dyer, 1986: 3), and Fight Club is no exception. Norton brings with him his roles as the murdering choirboy, Aaron Stampler in Primal Fear (1996), who we believe for the bulk of the film to be suffering from a multiple personality disorder, and the neo-nazi turned family man, Derek Vinyard from American History X (1998). Pitt brings with him his status as Hollywood heartthrob, along with his history of mental instability and sociopathic tendencies from his roles in Kalifornia (1993) and Twelve Monkeys (1995) as well as his straight laced cop harbouring the sin of anger from Fincher’s Seven. All these factors combine to open up the narrative to the audience’s ‘participation’ in the text (Hassan, 1986: 507), allowing the audience to engage with the text more comprehensively while being enticed by its characters and the film’s promise of enlightenment.
The Name of the Narrator

He's [Edward Norton] the one with the thankless role of the regular guy - so regular that his name is Jack.

- Stephen Hunter

The first issue to be addressed is the namelessness of the narrator. Leo Bersani writes:

"the names of people and of places contain and promise fixed, coherent personalities. To say a name is to totalise an existence. Even empty of content, the name confronts us with the prospect of a conceptual unity behind a world of bewilderingly fragmented phenomena" (1970: 3). The narrator’s lack of a name therefore positions him as a subject who is un-unified and fragmented, one who lacks a ‘fixed and coherent personality.’

Looking at the importance of a name in the realm of myth, Cassirer states:

The notion that name and essence bear a necessary and internal relation to each other, that the name does not merely denote but actually is the essence of its object, that the potency of the real thing is contained in the name – that is one of the fundamental assumptions of the mythmaking consciousness itself. (1946: 3)

More than depicting a lack of ‘coherent personality,’ the lack of a name in myth indicates a complete lack of essence.

Critics have often referred to the narrator as Jack. This is not in fact his name though; he merely adopts this moniker as a parody of the article in one of the magazines he reads in the Paper Street house (the articles are a direct reference to a sequence of articles once published in Reader’s Digest). He could just as easily have addressed himself by any other name. This is shown when the narrator reads an article to Tyler who is riding around the house on a bicycle:
TYLER
Hey, man, what you reading?

NARRATOR
Listen to this, it’s an article written by an organ in the first person. “I am Jack’s medulla oblongata, without me Jack could not regulate his heart rate, blood rate or breathing.” There’s a whole series of these. “I am Jill’s nipples.” “I am Jack’s Colon.”

TYLER

This highlights the narrator’s fragmented state and also links these literal organs to potential failure and death. It also informs us that the narrator is not actually ‘Jack.’

For the narrator, the selection of Jack is completely arbitrary, and therefore should not be assumed to be some sort of handle on his identity. He could just as easily have selected Jane, as in ‘Jane’s uterus’ or Jill as in ‘Jill’s nipples,’ except for the change in sex, for argument’s sake. Palahniuk’s novel uses John, another name synonymous with a lack of identity, as in ‘John Doe.’ If anything, the name Jack appears to have been selected by the director for its association with an everyman. As the Oxford Concise Dictionary puts it, Jack was “used originally to denote an ordinary man, hence the ‘knave’ in cards and ‘male animal’” (2001: 754) or in ‘jack of all trades’ (2001: 754). However, the name, Jack, does highlight the only salient point of this name - it denotes that the subject is male. So the narrator has no name and the only time he does momentarily assume one, (such as when he uses Jack in his boss’s office) it is male and common. It can be seen as indicating English nomenclature, but nothing more than that. The other names he momentarily uses in the support group meetings are ‘in-jokes,’ references to characters from Martin Scorsese’s films and Planet of the Apes (1968):
‘Travis’ comes from Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976), ‘Rupert’ from Rupert Pupkin in *The King of Comedy* (1983) and ‘Cornelius’ from *Planet of the Apes* (Fight Club DVD Commentary, 00:09:40). After deciding to divide up the support groups, the narrator writes his phone number on a card and hands it to Marla. While crossing the street, she turns and says: “It doesn’t have your name. Who are you? Cornelius? Rupert? Travis? Any of the stupid names you give each night?” But before he can answer her, a bus drives between them, acting as a transition to the next shot, still leaving him nameless to us the audience, as well as, apparently, to Marla.

Without his name proving to be of any use beyond signifying a dislocated and fragmented subjectivity, it is important to take a look at what characterises him at the beginning of the film. The narrator is characterised by his existence in a consumer society. This is shown through his fixation on finding furniture and accessories that he sees as ‘defining him as a person.’ He feels ‘defined’ by arbitrary items such as his “little coffee table in the shape of a yin-yang,” he is empty and only given shape through his ‘CK shirts, DKNY shoes and AX ties.’

To afford these purchases, he works as a recall coordinator for a major car company in what Gavin Smith refers to as “corrupt corporate America” (1999:58). His existence there is signified by e-mails, PowerPoint presentations, business flights and passing comments on the colour of his boss’s tie indicating which day of the week it is (as if he would not know otherwise). Home, as he describes it, is a “condo on the fifteenth floor of a filing cabinet for widows and young professionals.” This mundane and lonely existence leads to his insomnia, from which he is afraid he will literally die. He finally summarises his existence in a conversation with Tyler in the first bar scene where
he plainly states: “I had it all. I had a stereo that was very decent, a wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I was close to becoming complete.” This statement, bookended by assertions of individual completion or achievement, contains nothing but possessions. He is who he is because of what he owns and consumes. In his own eyes he literally is his possessions. He does not state any human qualities or affiliations of any kind and can only refer to himself in a fragmented and distant way through the names he uses and the parts of a fictional body, namely, Jack’s. His dislocation from human associations is highlighted when his apartment blows up and the only people he can call are a stranger he just met on a plane and a woman who apparently does not even know his name. He is only defined by his job and that which he owns.

Without a name or any meaningful human associations, he becomes a cipher, lonely and undeveloped. This fragmented identity also reflects what the film says about masculinity, with a perceived sense of masculinity arising only from fragmented sources and material wealth, while it, in itself, remains invisible and undefined. This is the epitome of Bly’s ‘soft man.’

There is also the chance that the narrator’s name might actually be ‘Tyler.’ However, even if this is the case, the film is distancing itself from this knowledge until the very end of the film when we know that he and Tyler are indeed the same person. So, if this is the case, the search for identity still remains firmly intact. In the novel this is definitely not the case. When he takes out his wallet to show Marla his driver’s license, he reads it as saying: “Not Tyler Durden” (Palahniuk, 2003: 172).
The Sublime and the Narrator

The sublime is the third meaning beyond earthly or divine authority, a close semiotic encounter of the third kind. Here masculine anxieties of the earthly kind are resolved by sublime spectacle.

- John Orr

Even though it may seem strange to include a section on the sublime in an exploration of *Fight Club*, this is indeed necessary to come to terms with the depiction of the narrator’s experience as above reality and to understand the use of certain cinematic techniques used throughout the film. An exploration of the Romantic sublime is also necessary to allow for the use of Fredric Jameson’s ‘technological sublime’ (1991) and Joseph Tabbi’s ‘postmodern sublime’ (1995) in relation to the film.

The film begins with the trip from the fear centre of the narrator’s brain. Fincher describes how he wanted the film to begin as a thought: “So I liked the idea of starting a movie from thought, from the beginning of the first fear impulse that went, Oh shit, I’m fucked, how did I get here?” (Smith, 1999: 62). The effect starts before the film’s visuals, however, as the thick liquid sound that can be heard over the Regency logo pre-empt the visual and narrative aspects. As we track backwards along the dark, moonlike landscape with puffing geysers occasionally lit by flashes of light, the experience is completely disorientating.

Joseph Tabbi explains how he sees the re-emergence of the sublime occurring in the literature of Don DeLillo, Norman Mailer, Joseph McElroy and Thomas Pynchon, and how he sees this coming about due to the way the “emergence of science and
technology has put to flight former metaphysical, religious, and political certainties”

(1995: x). More pointedly, Tabbı describes how,

Kant’s sublime object, a figure for an infinite greatness and infinite power in nature that cannot be represented, seems to be replaced in modern literature by a technological process. Now, when literature fails to present an object for an idea of absolute power, the failure is associated with technological structures and global corporate systems beyond the comprehension of any one mind or imagination. (1995: ix)

So the Romantic perception of the greatness of nature has been replaced in contemporary society and art with the greatness of ‘technological process.’ The difficulty the Romantics experienced in representing the unrepresentable greatness of nature can now be read into the attempt to represent infinite and unrepresentable technological processes in art.

Lyotard also expresses this modern day sentiment and describes it in relation to monolithic capitalist economy:

There is something of the sublime in capitalist economy. It is not academic, it is not physiocratic, it admits of no nature. It is, in a sense, an economy regulated by an idea – infinite wealth or power. It does not manage to present any example from reality to verify this idea. In making science subordinate to itself through technologies, especially those of language, it only succeeds, on the contrary, in making reality increasingly ungraspable, subject to doubt, unsteady. (1989: 209)

The enormity of the modern capitalist system and utilisation of technological process have rendered them beyond representation, rendering them sublime.
However, to fully understand this term we need to examine Edmund Burke’s pioneering explication of the term in ‘A Philosophical Inquiry into Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful’ (1801), where he lists the specific characteristics of the sublime in relation to the merely beautiful:

For sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small: beauty should be smooth and polished; the great, rugged and negligent, ... beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy: beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure (1801: 247-8)

From this list, certain aspects are of particular resonance with regard to sections of Fight Club. Burke describes the sublime as, amongst other things: large, dark, gloomy and rugged. As we accelerate backwards across this foreign landscape in the credit sequence, with its hints of light in a dark alien space, we feel insignificant in relation to this environment. We are flying backwards over something that creates bewilderment due to the fact that we cannot place it or comprehend it in its entirety because it seems infinitely large, with no end in sight, ‘gloomy’ in its selective use of lighting and it has a ‘rugged’ and undulating surface filled with geysers and plumes of gas. For all these reasons the scene appears worthy of awe and even terror, the way a thrill ride creates similar emotions.

One particular aspect of the sublime that is necessary to look at directly in relation to the opening sequence of Fight Club is the aspect of lighting. As Burke writes:

Mere light is too common a thing to make a strong impression on the mind, and without a strong impression nothing can be sublime. ... Light of an inferior strength to this [the sun] if it moves with great celerity, has the same power for lightning is certainly productive of grandeur, which it owes chiefly to the extreme
velocity of its motion. ... But darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light. (1801: 182-3)

These elements of the sequence work together to create an experience of the sublime through its use of lighting and scale, amongst others. So not only does the sequence begin with the fear centre of the narrator’s brain, the sequence also aims to create a sense of fear and terror in the viewer, emotions associated with the sublime (Burke, 1801: 183).

The same effect is created a number of times throughout the film, generally through the use of a cinematographic process called photogrammetry. Photogrammetry is explained as the process of “obtaining reliable information about physical objects and the environment through the processes of recording, measuring, and interpreting photographic images and patterns of electromagnetic radiant energy and other phenomena” (Williamson, 2005). In *Fight Club* it is photographic. In a sequence directly following the credit sequence, we fall out of the window and down to the basements of two other buildings laden with bombs. In this sequence we are made to feel so small that we fit through a bullet hole in a van window to see the massive bombs inside. In a scene in the narrator’s office we are small enough to perceive the trash on a galactic scale as we are told of Planet Starbucks, the IBM stellar sphere and the Microsoft galaxy as the textures of the various pieces of trash become magnified and rugged. This description is also significant in the way it invokes the largest imaginable objects, planets in outer space. We are also small enough to slide across the apartment’s floor as we stare up at the massive fridge and stove to watch the beginning of the explosion and are shown soaring over the dimly lit sex scene between Marla and Tyler. All these scenes implement photogrammetry and invoke a sense of the sublime.
Returning to the fear centre sequence, when we move up the gun barrel and start to realise that the pocked surface, glistening with huge droplets of liquid, is actually a man’s face, and a face with a gun in its mouth, we switch from astonishment or fear of what we are seeing and we instead feel sorry and afraid for him. All of these elements - the narrator’s head, the trashcan, his fridge, the van, the sex scene - are all depicted as sublime and fearful vistas instead of the ordinary and innocuous objects and actions they actually are: “The techno-sublime has one vital ingredient. It is a mythic re-ordering of the non-places of ‘supermodernity’ as futuristic and extra-terrestrial” (Orr, 1998: 195).

Elements of the sublime are injected into the narrator’s journey, raising it to the level of the epic and away from the mundane and the ordinary. As John Orr describes in his study of the sublime as a recourse in action films from the 1980s onward, this also allows for a distraction away from more earth-bound anxieties: “Here masculine anxieties of the earthly kind are resolved by sublime spectacle” (1998: 195) instead of through “studied angst” or “sharp social observation” (1998: 189). These sequences make us feel as if we should be filled with fear and astonishment, as one man’s attempt to find peace and fill the voids in his life are raised to the level of an epic mythic journey of massive proportions and consequences, and away from the ennui and reality of everyday life.
The Location of the Narrator

In sharp contrast to the drab ambiance of the narrator’s prosaic daytime world of offices, hotels, and public spaces, Durden inhabits a disorderly realm of eccentric dilapidation that suggests a shadowy subconscious hinterland.

- Gavin Smith

David Fincher has developed a reputation for using unnamed US cities in which to tell his stories: “We know from *Se7en* and *The Game* that director David Fincher likes to evoke enclosed, solipsistic worlds which are also conundrums” (Whitehouse, 1999: 46). This is shown in *Se7en*’s “unnamed sepulchral US city where it is always raining” and *The Game*’s “urban back lots” (Whitehouse, 1999: 46). Edward Norton also describes the city in *Fight Club* as “a city that’s everywhere and nowhere” (*Fight Club* DVD Commentary, 00:07:16), a site without clear demarcation or orientation. These locations also display a particular relation to their (generally male) subjects: “Society in a Fincher film is an urban nightmare labyrinth disrupted by the seething, denatured and corralled male ego it was built to control” (Whitehouse, 1999: 46).

Cities in general can be seen as “the sites for concrete operations of the economy” (Sassen, 1996: 72) and with the advent of globalisation, “cities become the sites of immense concentrations of economic power, while cities that were once major manufacturing centres suffer inordinate declines” (Sassen, 1996: 71). Decline can also be seen as occurring within the manufacturing sectors of cities as the ‘operations of economy’ shift, as manufacturing becomes a peripheral process: “peripheralization processes are occurring inside areas that were once considered as ‘core’ areas – whether
at the global, regional, or urban level” (Sassen, 1996: 71). This process sees the peripheral areas becoming industrial wastelands:

Today, however, it may be possible to think of all this a different way, at the moment of a radical eclipse of Nature itself: Heidegger’s “field path” is, after all, irredeemably and irrevocably destroyed by late capital, by the green revolution, by neo-colonialism and the megalopolis, which runs its superhighways over the older fields and the vacant lots and turns Heidegger’s “house of being” into condominiums, if not the most miserable, rat infested tenement buildings. The other of our society is in that sense no longer nature at all, as it was in precapitalist societies, but something else which we must now identify. (Jameson, 1991: 34-5)

Jameson later identifies this ‘other’ as multinational capital (1991: 36).

The city, as theoretical signifier of modernist and postmodernist discourse, can therefore be read as displaying the subject’s inability to comprehend the surrounding environment which has seen nature replaced with the modern and technologically advanced cityscape. Jameson’s subject is seen as being frightened by it, the way the Romantics were when confronted by the enormity of their ‘other,’ Nature. The modern technological environment is described as existing “in a complexity often beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind” (Jameson, 1991: 38). Jameson goes on to use Kevin Lynch’s book, *The Image of the City* (1960), as an example of ‘the alienated city’, which is above all, “a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves” (1991: 51).

Having laid out the general field of the relationship between the sublime experiences of the postmodern landscape described by Jameson, it is now necessary to look at the representation of the urban landscape in *Fight Club* to see the way they intersect. *Fight Club* is dominated by recurring urban locations which include: the Parker
Morris Building, the house on Paper Street, Lou’s Tavern, the support group locations, the narrator’s apartment and office, airports and hotels, hospitals and clinics.

Considerable time is also spent on planes and in cars and buses. The uses of these specific locations (except for the Paper Street house which requires its own analysis) are the same as those mentioned in work of Marc Augé on ‘non-places,’ which he describes in his ‘anthropology of supermodernity’ as follows:

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, as historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places (1995: 77-8)

He then cites examples of these ‘non-places’ as constituting:

A world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity) (Augé, 1995: 78)

He describes ‘non-places’ as “the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified … by totalling all the air, rail and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called ‘means of transport’ (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks [and] large retail outlets” (Augé, 1995: 79). Postmodernism is therefore synonymous with these kinds of ‘non-places.’

He also closely links these ‘non-places’ with an experience of solitude, as an individual passenger through them: “Assailed by the images flooding from commercial, transport or retail institutions, the passenger in non-places has the simultaneous
experiences of a perpetual present and an encounter with the self’ (Augé, 1995: 105), as “a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting and ephemeral” (Augé, 1995: 78) and one depicting “a very particular and modern form of solitude” (Augé, 1995: 93). There are many of these examples in Fight Club, particularly noticeable in the amount of time the narrator is depicted as sitting alone on a bus or at his office desk. These places have no real significance to him; they merely facilitate his existence as a corporate drone and amplify his dislocated subjectivity.

Augé also states: “The non-place is the opposite of utopia” (1995: 112) and it is similar to Foucault’s heterotopia (1995: 112). Heterotopias are also described the same way non-places were by Augé, to be “characteristic spaces of the modern world” (Soja, 1989: 16). In his article ‘Of Other Spaces’ (1986), Foucault describes heterotopias as counter sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (1986: 24)

Foucault uses the example of a mirror to illustrate the function of the heterotopia. He describes how the mirror allows you to see where you are not, in a place that does not actually exist over there, while the mirror itself does exist, and allows you to reconstitute yourself where you actually are (1986: 24).

He goes on to describe many aspects and types of heterotopias. ‘Crisis heterotopias’ and ‘heterotopias of deviance’ are of particular interest to this study and the analysis of the Paper Street house in particular. Foucault describes crisis heterotopias as
privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc. In our society, these crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing, though a few remnants can still be found. For example, the boarding school, in its nineteenth-century form, or military service for young men, have certainly played such a role, as the first manifestations of sexual virility were in fact supposed to take place “elsewhere” than at home. (1986: 24)

This description is particularly pertinent to the depiction of the house, which bears a striking resemblance to a boarding school when the all male space monkeys move in and begin sleeping on bunk beds in the basement with their shaved heads and uniforms. The links to military service are also evident through the same signifiers and the role Tyler assumes as a type of drill sergeant to them.

The house is also comparable to the ‘heterotopia of deviation’, which Foucault describes as replacing the ‘crisis heterotopia’:

But these heterotopias of crisis are disappearing today and are being replaced, I believe, by what we might call heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons (1986: 25)

While it is not being proposed that the house forms a prison or asylum, this is clearly a space for deviants in the eyes of society since to the public the space monkeys represent an anarchist militia group bent on disrupting the peace. This is particularly evident when the space monkeys are sitting in the ‘living room’ watching their exploits being broadcast on the news and the police commissioner chastising them. This aspect of the house will become particularly notable later in this study when the aspect of potential homosexuality is explored and when this is linked back to the house as heterotopia of deviation.
However, what distinguishes heterotopias from most other spaces is controlled access, and Foucault continues with this point:

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. (1986: 26)

This is most evident when the space monkeys are required to spend three days waiting outside the house to be allowed in. It is also required that they bring in only certain possessions such as clothes and burial money. Clearly, this can be seen as a form of ‘rite or purification.’ The narrator is also not merely invited into the house; it is only after he has asked to be admitted that Tyler allows him in. It should also be noted that the narrator states that the front door does not have a lock because of somebody breaking it down.

Essentially there is nothing physically keeping the men in or out, merely a form of ‘gentleman’s agreement’ or mutual respect.

The house on Paper Street does not function purely as a home (in some ways it does not fit this description at all). Instead the space serves various functions throughout the narrative. It appears to be a location that individuals, first the narrator and then the space monkeys, are displaced to, but never really feel ‘at home’ in. It is a peripheral space, a space outside of central, important spaces; it exists on the outskirts.

The more physical characteristics of the house also define this space as distinct from the core of the city. The narrator describes it as “waiting to be torn down,” a “dilapidated house in a toxic waste part of town” and that while they were there, he and Tyler were “alone for half a mile in every direction,” with “no neighbours, just some
warehouses and a paper mill” and that he did not know whether Tyler owned it or whether he was squatting.

Edward Soja, in his Marxist analyses of urban landscapes, states: “The city has to be seen not only in its distinctive role as a centre for industrial production and accumulation, but also as a control point for the reproduction of capitalist society in terms of labour power, exchange and consumption patterns” (1989: 95). Being distant from any other inhabited buildings, at night anyway, and in what appears to be an outlying and peripheral part of town, the house clearly does not form part of the bustling city centre or the part of it directly relating to late capitalism. The narrator’s apartment and his office depict this aspect of city life. As a result, the house appears to be outside of the capitalist sphere, with indistinct ownership and no apparent links to the surrounding spaces – he and Tyler appear to be a law unto themselves while in this outer space. Tyler and the narrator hitting golf balls through neighbouring windows without any apparent fear of punishment or recriminations is an example of this dislocation.

It is also important to note the way the Paper Street house is shown to function. As has been stated, the house serves as a heterotopia, and heterotopias are described as places which act as mirrors, unreal spaces which allow the subject to reconstitute itself where it actually is in reality (Foucault, 1986: 24). This is exactly the way the house works in the film. The narrator effectively flees his apartment, clearly implicated in capitalist ideology, to the house that allows him to reconstitute himself outside of the capitalist sphere of influence.

From these examples we can see that Fight Club readily engages with, and distances itself from, (dis)location elements that are seen as signifying postmodernity and
removing the narrator from a legitimate sense of self. The film includes ‘non-places’ where the narrator is constantly in transit, and the house on Paper Street (which never really serves him as a home) forms an interesting example. The film also shows a marked divide between spaces that form part of the active core of capitalist activity, such as the narrator’s office, and those that are depicted as being outside of the capitalist system. The location the narrator flees to also strongly resembles a Primitivist landscape outside of capitalist control, a place that has put technology to death, and stopped civilisation.
The Death of the Narrator

*In facing the doomed, he comes not to feel so bad and at last gets some shut-eye.*  
- Stephen Hunter

Critics are quick to identify Tyler’s relation to death through his references to ‘self destruction.’ However the film’s engagement with death is much more complex and comprehensive than is often realised. *Fight Club*’s opening scene shows a gun barrel shoved into the narrator’s mouth and this sets up a narrative that readily engages with the subject of death. Initially the narrator is shown to be afraid of death as he consults the doctor about it. The doctor advises that he should “lighten up” and take life less seriously. The narrator steps closer to death when he takes the doctor’s advice and visits his first support group. After crying for the first time, due to “hopelessness” and the compassion of others facilitated by Bob, the narrator sleeps. By attending the groups only as a tourist, “he shares others’ pain, which works as catharsis” (Diken & Laustsen, 2001: 1).

He sees this catharsis as a type of death: “Every evening I died, and every evening I was born again, resurrected.” These nightly ‘deaths’ renew his life by enabling him to sleep. However, the narrator only sees himself as metaphorically dying each night, while he is in the presence of those who are literally dying, like Chloe. He does not want to actually be like them, having the conditions they have, he just wants them to give him the release that will make him feel good about his life. The farcical nature of this endeavour is crystallised when he confronts Marla in the thrift shop in front of the sales assistant and states, “I want bowel cancer!” which duly raises the assistant’s eyebrow. He is at a safe distance from actual death: by surrounding himself with it, he feels alive relative to them.
This cycle of nightly death and rebirth all comes to an end, however, with the introduction of Marla, and we are told that ‘she ruins everything.’ His stable equilibrium is broken and he is forced to confront her about it:

NARRATOR
You’re a faker! You’re not dying!

MARLA
Sorry?

NARRATOR
In the Tibetan philosophy, Sylvia Plath sense of the word, I know we’re all dying, right, but you’re not dying the way Chloe back there is dying.

MARLA
So?

NARRATOR
So, you’re a tourist!

Marla’s distance from dying, her lie about her relative distance from death, reflects his lie, and belittles his vicarious experience of death. Marla effectively puts a mirror up to his lie and forces him to confront his actual remoteness from death. When Marla asks why he attends the meetings, he replies:

NARRATOR
I don’t know. When people think you’re dying, they really, really listen to you, instead of just …

MARLA
… instead of just waiting for their turn to speak.

NARRATOR
Yeah, yeah.
The narrator's reasons surely go further than this, though. He is shown saying extremely little or nothing at all in these meetings, even going so far as to say that ‘the less he said, the more they figured the worst.’ So he makes a habit of trying not to speak, and even his statement about people listening is interrupted by Marla, who, although she says what he was thinking, does not wait her turn. His salvation appears to lie in his newfound interconnectedness with desperate people, while at the same time being much further from the cause of their pain and death than they are.

Marla’s reasons for being at the groups are also not explicitly clear. Even though she says, “It’s cheaper than a movie and there’s free coffee” this statement appears more tongue-in-cheek than anything else. On the surface, Marla also does not fit in in these places of impending death. This is made apparent by her presence at the testicular cancer group and her comment about smoking at the tuberculosis groups.

The narrator also states, “Marla’s philosophy of life was that she might die at any moment. The tragedy, she said, was that she didn’t.” It is Marla’s attitude towards death that appears to attract the narrator to her, the way she can walk blindly into traffic, chain smoke and even attempt suicide. Her recklessness and the willing way she accepts death represents an acceptance that the narrator has not been able to achieve and he finds this attractive.

The narrator’s job as a recall coordinator also revolves around death. His application of ‘the formula’ directly causes gruesome car accidents. He manages to rationalise his actions by saying that “[o]n a long enough time line, the survival rate for everyone drops to zero.” He says this to convince himself of the inevitability of death, and he begins to see people as statistics, but he is still causing death. The closest he
comes to being confronted by actual death, though, is when he inspects a wreckage, but even this has had the human aspect removed, there are no actual bodies, just the remnants of passengers: braces and fat residue. Death is still an abstract concept to him, it has not become real.

On one of his numerous flights he says: “Every time the plane banked sharply on takeoff or landing I prayed for a crash or a mid-air collision. Anything.” These ideas and fantasies are as far as the narrator’s ‘death wish’ actually goes. While he is able to relate to the inevitability of death in his job, in an abstract sense, he appears to be unable to impress upon his own psyche the repercussions of statements like these on his own life. Instead, he makes offhand references to death and death fantasies, without being able to really grasp death, and let this positively impact his life. However, this all changes with the introduction of Tyler. Tyler is introduced to the narrator immediately after the audience is shown the most graphic depiction of the narrator’s will to die, his fantasy of the mid-air plane crash. As the plane is tearing apart, with the destruction just about to reach him, he wakes up in the seat next to Tyler. Tyler is the next step in his exploration of death.

The first line in *Fight Club* is the voice-over narration: “People are always asking me if I know Tyler Durden,” while the narrator has a gun shoved between his teeth. From these very first moments we are being presented with death as a beginning and a link between Tyler and death. Tyler then asks if he has any last words, declaring that the narrator’s death is inevitable.

Tyler also refers to the acceptance of death as ‘hitting bottom,’ as he teaches the narrator in the chemical burn sequence:
TYLER
The first soap was made from the ashes of heroes, like the first monkeys shot into space. Without pain, without sacrifice we would have nothing. (The narrator begs for vinegar)
But first you have to give up. First, you have to know, with no fear, know that someday you are going to die. Until you know that, you are useless.

... It's only after we’ve lost everything that we are free to do anything.
... (Tyler pours vinegar on his hand)
Congratulations. You're one step closer to hitting bottom.

What Tyler really wants is for the narrator to embrace his own physical frailty and the inevitability of his own death, rather than death in the abstract form of ideas and fantasies, the way he has dealt with it previously. He wants him to embrace the pain he feels, dispensing with his support structures, as they have obviously failed him, leaving him unhappy and immature. Tyler forces him to ‘hit bottom,’ and as he lies on the floor clutching his hand in an almost foetal position, he is born again, having experienced real pain, not merely witnessed it in others, like the members of the support groups.

Tyler also teaches the narrator to stop trying to improve himself. This sentiment comes through when, on a bus with the narrator, Tyler says: “Self improvement is masturbation, now self-destruction…” which Amy Taubin describes as “delivered with a pregnant, upward inflection and Cheshire cat grin” (1999: 16). He wants the narrator to be born again into a subjectivity that embraces its own weakness, instead of trying to merely improve or gloss over them, a subjectivity that does not rely on the strength of others or false conceptions about life. Tyler is teaching him to develop his own strength by confronting and accepting that he is human, that he is not immortal and that he will die. In accepting his frailties and weaknesses he will become strong through an
understanding and acceptance of pain and death, instead of wishing them away or watching them from a safe distance.
Chapter Two: The Interpersonal

In drawing comparisons between Fincher’s *Fight Club*, *The Game*, *Seven* and even *Alien 3*, Gavin Smith asserts that *Fight Club* is the “culmination of a current Fincher scenario: repressed straight white masculinity thrown into crisis by the irruption of an anarchic, implacable force that destabilizes a carefully regulated but precarious psychological order” (1999: 60). In *Fight Club* this destabilisation results in a reawakening of sorts, a realisation on behalf of the ‘straight white masculinity’ that it has been ‘repressed’ by certain forces that have until then been seen as supportive and nurturing. Fincher identifies these under the headings of ‘parents,’ ‘god’ and ‘teacher’ (Smith, 1999: 60). These authorities have governed the subject’s life by prescribing a lifestyle that will apparently lead to happiness. As Fincher puts it:

> [T]he story begins at the moment when the Edward Norton character is 29 years old. He’s tried to do everything he was taught to do, tried to fit into the world by becoming the thing that he isn’t. He’s been told, “If you do this, get an education, get a good job, be responsible, present yourself in a certain way, your furniture and your car and your clothes, you’ll find happiness.” And he hasn’t. And so the movie introduces him at the point when he’s killed off his parents and he realizes that they’re wrong. But he’s still caught up, trapped in this world he’s created for himself. … So the movie is really about that process of maturing. (Smith, 1999: 60)

The narrator crystallises the notion of his stunted development by stating: “I can’t get married, I’m a thirty year old boy.” This is also shown when his apartment explodes and he is unable to phone the one other personal acquaintance he appears to have, Marla. This also shows his inability to relate to women. Instead, he phones his imaginary friend, Tyler. At the beginning of the film, the narrator, even though clearly sedated and unfulfilled, finds his life in a negative equilibrium. He is static and unable to change his
personal life and integrate into society. This is shown primarily due to a dysfunctional parental structure, the dominance of which he must now overcome, if he is to be able to engage with the opposite sex and get married.
The Fatherless Child

In the movie’s [Fight Club’s] key scene, the narrator confronts his boss and proceeds to punch himself into a bloody pulp. ...Is it possible to play Oedipus in a world without Dad?

- J. Hoberman

When it comes to parents, Fight Club deals exclusively with fathers. The only mention of parents is when the narrator describes how his parents were never in the same room together and the fact that they “pulled this act for years … I’m six years old again, passing messages between parents.” Apart from this one example displaying disunity in the household, fathers are the only parents mentioned, and as the narrator states when Tyler leaves him, his father “dumped” him.

The fact that the narrator’s father, and therefore Tyler’s father as well, is physically absent from the film is indicative of Fight Club’s view of fatherhood as a dominant figure or master narrative (in the form of patriarchy) that has let the male subject down. This void is a marked one that is spoken into by the lead characters and is also, at times, populated with father figures who need to be overcome because the actual fathers are absent.

The concept of ‘father’ is also tied into broader discourses surrounding politics and religion as well. As Victor Siedler states: “The visions of authority which we inherit within western culture are tied up with conceptions of the father. Both Judaism and Christianity have learnt to think in terms of God the Father” (1988: 272). The Fight Club novel also states these links explicitly: “If you’re male, and you’re Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And sometimes you find your father in your
career” (Palahniuk, 2003: 186). Tyler also states this explicitly in the chemical burn sequence where he says: “Our fathers were our models for God.” Siedler writes that “[w]ithin patriarchal society our understanding of the nature of political authority has been tied up with our sense of the position of the father within the family” (1988: 272).

Generally, conceptions of ‘father’ are therefore wide-ranging and highly influential, as views of the father will impact on the way one views other dominant figures and structures as well.

To begin with, it is useful to look at the roles a father is generally expected to play in childhood development, generally involving that of disciplinarian and role model. However, a problem arises as these ideal conceptions of ‘father’ fall short in reality. Jonathan Rutherford writes how

Our fathers play a symbolic role in our transition to the masculine world, they become a focus for all the promises and status symbols we learn to expect will be ours. The mythology of his omnipotence is like a thick foliage that obscures his ordinariness. So many sons are soured and disappointed by their fathers. We invest meanings in them that they cannot fulfil. We are looking for a mythical figure, the perfect man we can aspire to, the good father who will love us. (1988: 55-6)

The roles that fathers are expected to play begin to conflict. The father, who is required to be visually powerful and successful through signs such as status symbols, is also required to be a visible and present role model and authority in the household. The need to go out and earn wealth conflicts with the need to be at home, instructing and disciplining. As Siedler continues, apart from the need for wealth continually growing and resulting in less available time, the types of jobs have also changed:
With the deskilling of work many men had lost control at work and the power to ensure a skilled job to their sons. With the bureaucratisation of many middle-class jobs men had learnt to identify themselves with the rules of the organisations for which they worked.

This has led to a transformation in the authority and presence that many men have within the contemporary family. Children have often not experienced their fathers as powerful and dominating figures, but as absent and withdrawn. (1988: 278)

These distant fathers have obviously moved further and further away from Rutherford’s ideal “mythical figure, the perfect man we can aspire to, the good father who will love us” (1988: 55-6). This also links back to Bly’s description of the remote father (1990: 21-7) and how older male figures are essential to balanced masculine development.

The section in Fight Club that most significantly deals with the characters’ father takes place immediately after the narrator is in his office with his boss. As his boss drops a report in front of him, the narrator says, “The people who had power over you, have less and less” and we move directly to the bathroom scene in the house on Paper Street. There, Tyler is lying in the bath and the narrator sits on the floor (Figure 1).
They discuss their father(s) as follows:

   TYLER
   If you could fight anyone, who would you fight?

   NARRATOR
   I'd fight my boss, probably.

   TYLER
   Really?

   NARRATOR
   Yeah, why, who would you fight?

   TYLER
   I'd fight my dad.

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

   TYLER
   He was setting up franchises.

As can be seen, immediately after the narrator is talking about his boss having less power over him, the next shot is the conversation between him and Tyler about their fathers. This clearly creates a link between his father and his boss, and along with the conversation, shows the father’s inadequacy. The discussion itself is significant because it describes the father as a businessman, treating his family like a franchise.

   Tyler continues to describe the limited long distance contact he has with his father:

   TYLER
   My dad never went to college, so it was really important that I'd go.

   NARRATOR
   Sounds familiar.

   TYLER
So I graduate, I called him long distance and asked: "Dad, now what?" He says, "Get a job."

NARRATOR

Same here.

TYLER

When I turned twenty five, my yearly call again: "Dad, now what?" He says, "I don't know, get married!"

NARRATOR

I can't get married; I'm a thirty-year-old boy!

TYLER

We're a generation of men raised by women.

Taking both fathers as the same person, the portrait is a very bleak one. After the age of six, the father is completely absent, save for an annual long-distance call. Tyler therefore does not know his father as a person, as a 'loving father' or 'a man who led a meaningful life.' Without any other guidance or any real sense of what his father does, he is told to go to college (even though his father never did), get a job and then get married. The first two instructions are followed, but when he gets to the third he balks. He is suddenly confronted by his own fledgling masculinity as a "thirty-year-old boy." The narrator cannot take the next step into his father's position as husband and father by getting married. This leaves the characters frustrated to the point where Tyler, when asked who he would like to fight, answers: "I'd fight my dad."

There is also a sense in the film that had the sons been closer to their fathers they would not be able to bridge the generation gap as a result of rapidly changing times anyway. Tyler says as much when he states: "Our generation has had no great Depression, no Great War. Our war is a spiritual war. Our depression is our lives." He is stating quite clearly that his is a generation without the obstacles that faced the previous
generation, that this new generation of ill-defined men cannot define themselves the same way their fathers did, and as a result the two generations cannot relate to each other. Instead they find themselves without role models, in jobs they hate and unable to form families of their own.

The effects of this lack of effective male role models or contact with their fathers finds the narrator sitting on his toilet, looking at what appears to be a pornographic centrefold, but turns out to be an IKEA furniture catalogue (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

The voiceover states: "Like so many others, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct." The image of a man ogling naked women in the bathroom, visualising them in sexual fantasies, has been subverted into man visualising how he would like to decorate his apartment. The image has been feminised, just as his development has been feminised as a result of being raised by women. His apartment is also notable as he describes it as a "filing cabinet for widows and young professionals." (Note the absence of older men in the description.) This absence of older male role models has resulted in men being too feminine. There are also more subtle signs of this yearning for older men, such as Tyler
and the narrator playing golf near the Paper Street house. The well-established pastime of fathers and husbands is played out as the men aimlessly, amateurishly and destructively hit golf balls into the darkness. This again relates to Robert Bly’s references to a ‘soft man’ being the result of too little contact with the older men of the community.

When Tyler asks: “If you could fight anyone, who would you fight?” the narrator answers that he would fight his boss, and that he never knew his father. It is as if his boss has occupied the position his father would have taken had he known him. With the complete absence of an actual father in the film, the representation of the narrator’s boss becomes all the more significant.

The narrator’s boss is the other side of the absent and distant father figure in the household; he represents the father at work, away from his family and household. He no doubt has the status symbols and visually depicts success through his position of being in charge at work. This is also apparent in the way that he dresses. He is always neat in his office attire, and he always wears a tie. He represents the ‘ideal’ office worker, diligent, ordered and successful. His dress also becomes the first contact point between him and the narrator we are presented with. When we first see his boss it is through the narrator’s eyes; his boss walks into the narrator’s office and sits down on the narrator’s desk. The framing of the shot cuts his head off and we are forced to focus on his torso, and more particularly, his shirt and tie (Figure 3).
The narrator describes his boss's clockwork dressing routine with disdain, as it becomes his indicator of what day it is and his fixation with the colour 'cornflower-blue.' This is again highlighted when he asks whether he can have the icon in that colour during the Monday morning board meeting. This stands out in the characterisation of the boss in his representation as the dominant older male figure in the film. His boss is preoccupied with completely trivial matters, rather than anything of apparent consequence to those around him and his business.

The further the narrator progresses along his path to enlightenment, the more he tends to clash with his boss. Initially this is shown subtly through visuals such as his boss glancing at his black eye with condescension while they are using the urinal, notable as a space restricted to men and one symbolising male openness and vulnerability. The narrator, however, carries on whistling, unaffected. The confrontation is also noticeable through the difference between the two characters' attitudes - the narrator's disillusionment contrasts strongly with his boss's 'pep', grandé latte-induced or not. The confrontations then become verbal as his boss asks him about the blood on his collar, tells
him he cannot smoke in the office and that he should take the day off work, get himself
together and come back on Monday with some clean clothes. The next time his boss
comes to see him in his office, the narrator is not ‘together’ and states, “I don’t even wear
a tie to work anymore.” His boss is clearly trying to change the narrator’s appearance to
represent a dutiful and respectable employee; his boss is trying to mould the narrator into
a younger version of himself.

The conflict becomes visual and verbal in two instances: the first is when his boss
brings him the rules that he left in the photocopy machine, and the second is the final
showdown that becomes violent. The former is notable because it shows the narrator
literally standing up to his boss as he stands up and takes the rules from him. This is the
first time that the narrator looks physically bigger than his boss. As they stand facing
each other the narrator is shown, with the aid of camera angles, to be physically larger
than his boss (Figure 4). Their actions also display this change as the narrator rips the
piece of paper from his boss’s hand, and his boss stands motionless and stunned. His boss
has suddenly become aware, both through the narrator’s actions and through his
threatening monologue, that he is defying his boss’ position of authority.
In the latter confrontation, the last one in which we see his boss, it is the narrator that starts the conversation. In a posture strongly resembling a father beginning to chastise a child, the narrator says: "We need to talk." In an attempt to attain control over the situation, his boss then asks where they should start, his constant absenteeism or his unpresentable appearance. His boss has here again foregrounded appearance as key to his role in the business. This again highlights the narrator's initial belief that his clothes define him. The narrator then beats himself up. In this sterile, ordered environment, punishment would generally take the form of a 'review' or some other clerical punishment. The narrator, however, demands that the situation be dealt with physically, and since his boss will not punish him physically, he does so himself. His fantasy, of having his boss beat him up for being bad, is surmised by the guards, and his other aim, of getting 'corporate sponsorship,' is achieved. In so doing, the narrator has also acted out his fantasy of having physical contact with his father through a father figure disciplining him. He is also able to leave the job and his boss behind, having overcome his father figure and his rules, effectively 'killing his father.'
Tyler confronts a father figure in much the same way that the narrator does. Instead of confronting his boss, Tyler gets to confront Lou. Lou fills much the same position as the narrator's boss; he is an older, apparently successful, dominant man.

The scenes of the narrator fighting his boss and Tyler confronting Lou represent the characters' opportunity of directly confronting Lacan's concept of the 'name-of-the-father' (1977). As Lacan theorised in his chapter, ‘The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis’, the concept of father becomes a symbolic signifier representing the father that stands in the way of the son reaching sexual maturity and represents “the figure of the law” (1977: 67). The son cannot do this in the realm of the family because this would mean sleeping with his mother in the Oedipal scenario. So the family and the ‘name of the father’ need to be overcome if the son is to develop. *Fight Club* shows this as a physical fight.

The scene where Tyler confronts Lou can be seen as the turning point in the narrative as Tyler and the narrator begin to move in different directions with the formation of Project Mayhem straight after this fight. This fight also marks the beginning of the unravelling of their relationship.

Tyler confronts Lou, his version of the dominant father figure, in front of a meeting of Fight Club. The scene starts with the following speech:

**TYLER**

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Man, I see in Fight Club the strongest and smartest men who’ve ever lived. I see all this potential. And I see it squandered. God damn it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables. Slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We’re the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War, no Great Depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives. We’ve all been raised on television to believe that one day we’d all be millionaires and
movie gods and rock stars, but we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off.

This calls attention to the distance between the generations of fathers and grandfathers, and the current generation of young men. It emphasises the disillusionment that Tyler feels about the ‘strong and smart men’ who have come to him and his club for guidance where their fathers have failed. Tyler then follows this up with his proclamation of the rules of Fight Club, but before he can finish, Lou, who is smartly dressed in a double-breasted suit and a tie, and his thug interrupt him as they come down the stairs and confront Tyler.

As he does so, Tyler bluntly asks, “Who are you?” Clearly infuriated, Lou replies: “There's a sign on the front says ‘Lou's Tavern.’ I'm fucking Lou. Who the fuck are you?” Lou is forcing Tyler to submit to his dominant position as father figure in this situation. The ‘house’ is clearly Lou’s; it bears his name as ‘the name of the father’:

LOU
Who told you motherfuckers that you could use my place?

TYLER
We have a deal worked out with Irvine.

LOU
Irvine? Irvine’s at home with a broken collarbone. He don’t own this place. I do.

Once Lou has had enough of what he clearly sees as an insolent attitude from Tyler, he starts beating him up. However, Tyler does not fight back; instead he allows the beating to continue, at points even provoking Lou further. This is clearly an attempt to get Lou to accept his violent barbaric side, one hidden beneath his smart clothes and behind his
thug's gun. Through his baiting, Tyler has managed to get Lou to participate in their activity and he has managed to get Lou to fight on his own terms, showing Tyler's control, and in effect, a kind of dominance.

When Tyler finally goes limp, Lou stops and moves away from him, calling him 'loony.' Just as he is verbally distancing himself from what has just happened and from Tyler, as he attempts to straighten his hair and clothes, Tyler attacks him and forces him to the ground. As Tyler is lying on top of Lou, Tyler shouts, “You don't know where I've been, Lou! You don't know where I've been!” In the process he splatters Lou with his blood. In this invocation of something that a parent would say when their child brings home a stray animal or puts a foreign object in its mouth, Tyler is stating that Lou is completely ignorant of what Tyler's life has entailed, what he has endured and in what ways he is dangerous. In so doing he is again emphasising the distance between these two men, between the older and the younger, men who could be an estranged father and son. This also emphasises the class and economic fears that Tyler is able to tap into. The smart businessman is shown to know nothing about what is happening to the men below his economic position in society. Tyler believes that he understands Lou, and because Lou cannot understand Tyler, Tyler appears truly dangerous to him.

Tyler has clearly won this conflict, by playing on Lou’s fears and not fighting back, and by not being afraid of the beating he is receiving. Tyler has shown himself to be more powerful than Lou, to be dominant. The discipline Lou tries to enforce has no effect. This act of self-control by Tyler allows the men of Fight Club to continue using the space as he is shown to be dominant over its authority, and it allows Tyler to say smugly to Lou, “See you next week,” as if Lou has also found out something about
himself in the process. Tyler has also succeeded in ‘killing’ his father figure by showing that his discipline means nothing.

These confrontations between son and father figures show the break that has occurred between them. ‘Fathers’ are absent and unaware of where their sons have been while they were absent. The film shows this break being bridged through violent physical contact initiated by ‘their sons.’ Even though Tyler and the narrator cannot come into contact with their actual father(s), they enact or perform a type of bonding through confrontation that then allows them to move on with their life, having dispensed with the domination of their symbolic fathers.
Gender Roles

Fight Club *means to be one sustained psychosexual ejaculation.*

- J. Hoberman

The first aspect of *Fight Club’s* depiction of sexuality that requires analysis is its apparent misogyny. Jill Nelmes accounts for the way this plays itself out by stating:

*Fight Club* gives a somewhat misogynist representation of women: Marla is defined as the cause of all Jack’s problems – ‘She ruined everything’ – and women are a threat, representing fear of castration; Tyler says to Jack ‘a woman could cut off your penis and throw it out the car’ [sic]. … Women are cast as binary opposites and defined in negative terms; even the woman dying in the beginning of the film [Chloe] is defined in terms of her sex and as being sexually unattractive. Marla’s role in the film is that of an outsider and a threat to Jack’s existence. She fulfils two roles, first to make Jack unhappy and second to provide sex. (2003: 275)

However, this apparent misogyny is problematised through the depiction of the narrator’s relationship with Tyler. At the very beginning of the film, which turns out to be its ending as well, the narrator is shown kneeling in front of Tyler with a phallic gun in his mouth. The sexually laden shot continues with the narrator’s voiceover: “And suddenly I realise that all of this, the gun, the bombs, the revolution has got something to do with a girl named Marla Singer.” From this moment of Marla’s introduction we realise that her presence is profoundly sexual and that Marla’s sexuality disturbs the sexual tension between Tyler and the narrator.

In looking at the depiction of women in *Fight Club*, Marla emerges as the only developed female character (the only other female characters being Chloe and the support group leader). However, before we can look at how she fits in, we need to look at *where*
she fits in because she is completely absent from vast sections of the narrative. As Amy Taubin states, Fight Club is “a secret society open to anyone who’s male” (1999: 17) and as such Marla is completely excluded from the boys’ club. She is also excluded from the friendship between Tyler and the narrator, as she never sees the two together and Tyler tells the narrator specifically not to talk to her about him. In an interview for *The Los Angeles Magazine*, Helena Bonham Carter states that the film is, “about two young men who set up an amateur bare-knuckle fighting club and the woman who comes between them. It could be described as *Raging Bull* crossed with *Harold and Maude*. But I’m in the *Harold and Maude* bit” (Johnson, 1999). Bonham Carter has effectively situated her character outside of the sections of the narrative that involve the men’s bonding and their fighting.

Marla only appears sporadically throughout the narrative. She is referred to in the opening sequence, but she is only seen after about ten minutes when she appears at one of the narrator’s support groups and ends this appearance by replacing the penguin in the ice cave. She is then absent as we are introduced to Tyler and as the Fight Club develops. She appears again when she phones the house and Tyler saves her from her suicide attempt. Her appearance in this section is characterised by her sexual relationship with Tyler and the occasional confrontation with the narrator, both completely exclusive. She is then absent for a considerable length of time as Fight Club becomes Project Mayhem. The narrator then reintroduces her towards the end when he phones her and she tells him that he and Tyler are indeed the same person. This section includes the conclusion of the narrative and the same scene that starts the film and ends with the narrator and Marla holding hands as the buildings come crashing down (Chart 1).
It is now necessary to look more closely at the aspects of the narrative to which she is allowed access. It is tempting to assume that she is permitted into the more domestic aspects of the narrative; however, close investigation shows that she is not permitted to occupy this space and the classically stereotyped female roles within the Paper Street house. To begin with, she does not ever live there; she still stays in the flat where Tyler saves her. When she does stay over it is merely the consequence of her and Tyler’s lovemaking. She is also not allowed to stay over very long as the narrator quickly shoos her out of the house at Tyler’s request. She is only welcome in the house as Tyler’s sexual plaything. She therefore fits into the whore side of the ‘mother/whore’ male fantasy.

If anything, she disrupts the domestic couple created by the narrator and Tyler. As he straightens Tyler’s bowtie, the narrator states: “Most of the week we [himself and Tyler] were Ozzie and Harriet.” Marla disturbs the happy couple, which in this case is made up of two men, in a subversion of the nuclear family unit with the mother and father at its stable centre. It is depicted as ironic that a woman would be disturbing this stability since she would generally be at the core of such an arrangement. This depicts the unstable equilibrium that has had to be formed due to the narrator’s inability to engage in ‘normal’ romantic relations with women.
Articles that refer to Marla inadvertently comment on her appearance in the form of make-up and clothing and often appear to delight in describing them. These include calling her a “Merchant/Ivory heroine … a grunge goddess, complete with wildly unkempt hairdo, sloppily applied eyeliner, a thrift-shop wardrobe, and a lit cigarette perpetually dangling from her lips” (Crowdus, 2000), “a desperate, dark-eyed, chain smoking support group junkie whose hair seems styled by a hungry rat” (Johnson, 1999) and “a Goth queen with the opalescent skin of a heroin addict and the belligerent manner of Judy Garland at the start of a bender” (Taubin, 1999: 17). There appear to be various reasons for this fascination with the way she is presented, since Bonham Carter’s previous roles included *Hamlet* (1990), *Twelfth Night* (1996) and *The Wings of the Dove* (1997) with the appropriate attire. Richard Johnson’s article entitled ‘Boxing Helena’ deals almost exclusively with this aspect and leads with the line: “Helena Bonham Carter seemed forever trapped in a 19th-century drawing room. But with *Fight Club*, the queen of period breaks out of the box – for good” (Johnson, 1999).

Marla is so striking because she looks the way she does and still becomes the female love-interest. She does not fit the stereotypical girlfriend role and is unthinkable as a ‘suitable’ mother. She represents death, demise and disintegration, yet she is depicted as the narrator’s partner at the end. Jim Uhls describes the uniqueness of this match by describing the film as a ‘romantic comedy’:

[B]ut not a typical romantic comedy. It has to do with the characters’ attitudes toward a healthy relationship, which is a lot of behaviour which *seems* unhealthy and harsh to each other, but in fact does work for them – because both characters are out on the edge psychologically. (Sragow, 1999)
We are even told that the entire narrative, “all of this - the gun, the bombs, the revolution - has got something to do with a girl named Marla Singer.” Her costume is used to amplify her character as atypical, which highlights her relationship with the narrator as out of the ordinary.

However, in a shift from the norm, if one were to ask any audience member which image dominates the film, it would surely be Tyler’s naked torso. This is particularly ironic due to a conversation between Tyler and the narrator on a bus looking at a Gucci underwear billboard (Figure 5). Tyler turns to the narrator and asks, “Is that what a man looks like?” Looking at the model on the billboard alongside the iconic images of Tyler (Figure 6 and 7), the differences appear minimal.
The dominance of Tyler’s chiselled physique also wholly overshadows Marla as sexual object. When the narrator interrupts their noisy lovemaking, it is a nude Tyler who answers the door, again associating his body with sex.

Another point of importance in this regard happens straight after we are given the line about how ‘all this’ has to do with Marla. We are then immediately shown the narrator’s face being thrust into what looks like a woman’s chest (Figure 8). It is just possible to make out a nametag stuck to what appears to be a woman’s chest that reads “Hello I’m Bob.”

![Figure 8.](image)

So before we have even seen Marla, we are shown a ‘woman’s’ chest belonging to a man and the narrator pressed against it for comfort. In some ways Bob is more feminine than Marla. His breasts are more apparent than hers and he is also more openly emotional, which plays into the stereotypic representation of femininity. Bob further problematises a standard view of female appearance in the film through his presentation as a maternal figure. Bob also has “bitch tits.” Not only does he have breasts, they are
huge and obvious. The narrator goes on to describe them as “enormous, the way you'd think of Gods as big.” The narrator then explains why Bob has them: “Eight months ago, Bob's testicles were removed. Then hormone therapy. He developed bitch tits because his testosterone was too high and his body upped the oestrogen.” So not only does he have a visual female characteristic, he is also missing his testicles and his hormones are out of balance with very high levels of oestrogen. In this supportive environment and within Bob’s embrace, the narrator feels safe and says: “And that was where I fit, between those huge sweating tits.” Bob also moves in a more feminine way, “knees together, those awkward little steps” while Marla strides across the road into traffic.

The narrator feels nurtured by the support group environment due to the vulnerability and emotional honesty of the men like Bob who attend the group. When Thomas cries and the other men feel each other’s pain and show it visually, the narrator looks around bewildered. Even though he does not necessarily feel this emotion himself initially, while in Bob’s embrace he feels loved: “Bob loved me because he thought my testicles were removed too.” Immediately after the narrator has described a womblike experience of being “lost in oblivion, dark and silent and complete”, pressed up against Bob’s breasts, he is depicted as a baby, curled up in his bed with his hand to his mouth saying, “Babies don’t sleep this well.” What we have seen is the process of the narrator being born again into the narrative, to a new mother, Bob, who nurses him to health.

However, as Henry Giroux writes, Bob provides a strong critique of support in a maternal sense:

Bob becomes a not too subtle symbol in the film, personifying how masculinity is both degraded (he has breasts like a woman) and used in a culture that relies upon
the “feminine” qualities of support and empathy rather than “masculine” attributes of strength and virility to bring men together. (2002: 264)

Even after Bob has stopped going to the support groups and joined Fight Club, he still retains his feminine physical qualities (he still has his ‘bitch tits’) and ‘feminine emotions’ (he is noticeably emotional when he sees the narrator and gives him a big hug) but uses these qualities in a masculine way; his hug later becomes a headlock as he smothers the narrator in a fight. Thereafter, in a show of brotherly concern, he asks: “I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Tyler also acknowledges Bob’s physical appearance when he attempts to join Project Mayhem, shouting, “You’re too old, fatman, and your tits are too big.” Even though we are used to this sort of abuse from Tyler to the applicants, these comments really affect Bob, as he does not fit into the group of young, virile men. He is not just ‘too young’ or ‘too blonde’ the way the others are, he is shown as too sensitive as well, and as a result, too feminine. This is also why his death has the effect it does - the other men are there because it fits who they are, it seems as if Bob is there just because he has followed everyone else there from Fight Club.

Gender roles have therefore been substantially subverted by this point in the film. The depictions of men have involved a group of testicle-less men and men with breasts, while the female characters are associated with sex but either cannot get it (Chloe) or are overshadowed in their sexuality by bare-chested men, most notably Tyler.
Marla as *femme fatale*

*It is an understatement to claim that the films of director David Fincher are reminiscent of classical film noir.*

- Sean Lindsay

Another label placed on *Fight Club* is that it is *film noir*. However, this appears to be another example of critics ‘just not getting it.’ While there does appear to be some basis for a comparison between *Fight Club* and *film noir*, to label it a *noir* does not account for particular aspects of the film, particularly Marla’s role and the ending.

In an article for *Senses of Cinema*, Sean Lindsay categorises the film, along with Fincher’s other films to varying degrees, as a clear example of *film noir*:

The canonical texts written on the subject [*film noir*], notably Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton’s “Towards a Definition of Film Noir” (1995) and Paul Schrader’s “Notes on Film Noir” (1972), read like ‘how to’ guides for understanding films like *Alien 3*, *Seven*, *Fight Club*, and to a lesser extent *The Game* and *Panic Room*. Schrader points out that “film noir’s techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity, then submerge these self doubts in mannerism and style. In such a world style becomes paramount; it is all that separates one from meaninglessness.” (2003)

Having reduced *film noir* to this single statement, Lindsay then proceeds to describe Fincher’s work as something resembling the postmodern:

If this is true, Fincher has created a series of films that are anything but meaningless. His slick and glossy treatment of a dark world frequently garners accusations that his films are shallow experiments in style. It is more accurate to say that Fincher absorbs styles and tastes of Hollywood, reflects them, and twists them. He pulls back the curtain, revealing a mechanical process at the core of the filmmaker’s art, leaving us to wonder how we lost our humanity in something we love so much. (2003)
While it is tenable that *Fight Club* is ‘reminiscent’ of *film noir*, the film is reminiscent of many film styles (even he states the plural) such as the standard action film or thriller, as well as philosophies and political movements, but he only singles out *film noir* in his investigation. How exactly Lindsay sees this ‘absorption’ and ‘twisting’ taking place is also never made clear. He has managed to evoke *film noir* by mentioning it, but never gets down to actually discussing it. If he had he would surely have realised that there are a few key flaws to this link.

In their respective articles, Schrader (1996), Borde and Chaumeton (1996) are attempting to come to terms with a complex set of constituent elements that come together in various combinations to form *film noir*. Paul Schrader states, *film noir* “is not defined, as are the western and gangster genres, by conventions of setting and conflict, but rather by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood” (2005: 53). However, this mood is created through the implementation of certain ‘recurring techniques,’ such as “[t]he majority of scenes are lit for night” (Schrader, 2005: 57), “oblique and vertical lines are preferred to horizontal” (Schrader, 2005: 57) along with “an almost Freudian attachment to water” (Schrader, 2005: 57) and there is “a love of romantic narration” (Schrader, 2005: 57) while a “complex chronological order is frequently used to reinforce the feelings of hopelessness and lost time” (Schrader, 2005: 58).

Some of these are absent in *Fight Club*, such as the attachment to water and oblique and vertical lines, while others have some legitimacy, such as the complex chronological order, even though they are tenuous. Others are very tenable, such as the majority of scenes being ‘lit for night.’ Brad Pitt refers to this aspect directly on the DVD commentary when he refers to how dark the film is (*Fight Club* DVD Commentary,
00:02:24). He states this in particular reference to the Parker Morris Building shot but this could just as easily be said about the film as a whole, particularly the shots of Fight Club and the house on Paper Street. These are in sharp contrast to the office scenes lit with light that looks fluorescent. However, the most important point to note here is that Schrader stresses that film noir is not a genre like the western or gangster which can be recreated anytime and anywhere, instead: “Film noir is a specific period of film history, like German Expressionism or the French New Wave” (2005: 53). As such it is at home in a specific time in history, and that time has passed.

Borde and Chaumeton also take into account prominent characters that further complicate the comparison. They include ‘rotten policemen,’ the ‘private detective,’ ‘ambiguous victims,’ an ‘ambiguous protagonist’ and the ‘ambiguous femme fatale’ (Borde and Chaumeton, 2005: 21-22). To some extent the policemen in Fight Club can be seen as rotten due to their allegiance to Project Mayhem and the protagonist might be seen as ambiguous by the end of the film. However, it lacks ambiguous victims and a private detective, even though the narrator arguably becomes one by the end. The femme fatale, however, is a major problem. Marla does not function as a femme fatale in the classic sense even though some critics see her as one (Diken & Laustsen, 2001:1). She is too much of a subsidiary character, even though the narrator claims otherwise by saying that everything that happens is as a result of her presence. Two critics that do notice this anomaly are Roger Ebert who describes Marla as a “feisty, chain-smoking hellcat who is probably so angry because none of the guys thinks having sex with her is as much fun as a broken nose” (1999) and Liza Schwarzbaum who believes that “the Narrator’s relationship with Bob is richer than anything he has with Marla” (1999).
An understanding of how *Fight Club* is similar to *film noir* appears to hinge, more than any other single aspect, on an investigation of Marla’s role as *femme fatale*. Kate Stables, in her exploration of the re-emergence of the *femme fatale* in 90s cinema, writes that “[p]ostmodern film, which pillages, adulterates and reconstitutes past cinemas with extraordinary facility, has an unsatiable appetite for film noir” (1998: 164), and then goes on to single out its particular fondness for the *femme fatale*:

Though this is frequently expressed as a sort of ‘Noir-Lite’, that’s to say coating thriller scenarios in a thin dressing of ‘expressionist lighting’, 40s styling, and a saxophone soundtrack, the chief object of desire for recent mainstream film has been the *femme fatale*, transplanted wholesale from the thrillers of the 40s and 50s. (1998:164)

So what exactly constitutes a *femme fatale*? Janey Place introduces her analysis entitled ‘Women in Film Noir’ with a description that highlights the following aspects and incarnations of the *femme fatale*:

The dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in western culture. She is as old as Eve, and as current as today’s movies, comic books and dime novels. She and her sister (or *alter ego*), the virgin, the mother, the innocent, the redeemer, form the two poles of female archetypes. (1998: 47)

Place goes on to clarify, “Thus woman here as elsewhere is defined by her sexuality: the dark lady has access to it and the virgin does not” (Place, 1998: 47). Before we get to her *alter ego* the virgin, though, an analysis of the characteristics of the *femme fatale* is necessary, beginning with her visual rendering.

A reading of the film as *noir* text is possible if one concentrates on the more visual aspects of Marla’s representation towards the beginning of the film. Janey Place
begins her look at the visual characteristics of the ‘dark lady’ with a look at the way she is depicted with an ‘expressive use of darkness’, “both real, in predominantly underlit and [in] night-time scenes, and psychologically through shadows and claustrophobic compositions” (1998: 51). She also notes that,

The iconography is explicitly sexual, and often explicitly violent as well: long hair (blond or dark), make-up and jewellery. Cigarettes with their wispy trails of smoke can become cues of dark and immoral sensuality, and the iconography of violence (primarily guns) is a specific symbol (as is perhaps the cigarette) of her ‘unnatural’ phallic power. (1998: 54)

This iconography is again amplified through the use of cinematic techniques:

The strength of these women is expressed in the visual style by their dominance in composition, angle, camera movement and lighting. They are overwhelmingly the compositional focus, generally centre frame and/or in the foreground, or pulling focus to them in the background. (Place, 1998: 55-6)

With these signifiers identified, it is now possible to analyse Marla and compare the two. It is most useful here to look at the way Marla is introduced in the film.

As the narrator nuzzles into Bob’s chest and describes Bob’s love, how he is ready to cry and enjoy his ‘vacation,’ the sound of Marla’s heels hitting the steps penetrates the shot through a sound bridge and shatters his calm. We then see Marla’s silhouette coming through the door in a long shot. As she moves into a close-up she finally moves into a shaft of light that illuminates her face and large sunglasses and the part of her chest not covered by her black dress and jacket. As she removes a cigarette from her mouth she utters her first line, “This is cancer, right?” which clearly stuns the group of hugging men.
With this entrance, Marla has displayed many of the characteristics already mentioned. She is displayed largely in darkness, and this sense of obscurity is perpetuated through her eyes being covered by large black sunglasses. She is also shown smoking (a perhaps phallic) cigarette and the selective use of lighting has also touched the top of her chest while at the same time exposed very little, to some extent frustrating the sexual male gaze, displaying her sexual control and ambiguity.

The next sequence shows Marla encroaching on the narrator’s other support groups as well. We first see her sitting on the outside of the ‘Remaining Men Together’ testicular cancer group circle, still smoking, drinking coffee with a shaft of light picking up the top of her crossed legs (Figure 9).

Then she is shown in ‘Free and Clear’ seated closer to camera at a table, still smoking and wearing her glasses (Figure 10).
The next group she is shown at is ‘Seize the Day’ which is a particularly notable scene depicting noir stereotypes. While focussing on the narrator, we are suddenly shown a flash of a close up of her striking lighter and then we are shown the narrator again. After the narrator is shown beginning to turn around we are given a high angle close up of Marla lighting her cigarette (Figure 11).

Her face, except for her lips, is obscured by a large brimmed black hat that forms a diagonal line that covers almost half of the frame. The small amount of light in the frame
slightly illuminates her lips, her cigarette, the lighter flame and the top of her chest. Once we are shown the narrator’s reaction shot we are then shown a slow-motion dolly shot, as we creep into a close-up of her face, again with hat and sunglasses, this time puffing out smoke (Figure 12).

![Figure 12.](image)

We then see an over-the-shoulder shot with half the narrator’s face in close-up, screen right, and Marla out of focus and barely discernible in the background, behind him. These shots in particular paint Marla as a *femme fatale*, with her ‘dark lady’ appearance emphasised through her clothing and accessories as well as her confident sexuality coming through in the cinematography and lighting. This also depicts the way she is encroaching ever closer into the narrator’s space, until she is depicted over his shoulder.

The sound in this sequence also highlights her disturbing and almost dangerous presence. Sounds, such as the striking of her lighter, are very loud while an ambient drone cuts out other background noise as it grows with the creep into Marla smoking. This is overlapped with the ticking of a stopwatch, which stresses the narrator’s lack of
sleep, and this is then overlapped with the sounding of a church bell as the narrator runs out of the building to see Marla disappearing in silhouette down a side street. All of these sounds add to the foreboding tension created by Marla's presence and add to her striking visual presence.

Another important scene to look at is Tyler's introduction to Marla after he picks up the phone and hears that she is attempting suicide. After the narrator merely replaces the receiver on top of the base, showing that he does not really care whether she dies or not, Tyler picks it up and goes to help her. She welcomes him in in a blue dress with more light on her than the previously analysed scene. She is also not smoking or wearing a hat or glasses so her face is visible. This change in her depiction begins to shows her departure from the role of *femme fatale*. After she slips off the bed, Tyler is shown leaning against a chest of drawers when he notices a large dildo placed on top of it (Figure 13).

![Figure 13.](image)

He bumps the chest and the dildo wobbles. Marla replies, "Oh, don't worry, it's not a threat to you." This moment is interesting in its relation to the psychoanalytic view of the
to a male gaze. This is also visible through the obscured male ‘participant’ who might threaten a male gaze.

The next scene, chronologically, shows the narrator speaking to whom he believes to be Tyler coming down the stairs. It turns out to be Marla and he is clearly disturbed by her appearance in his ‘home.’ The scene is distinct from the previous one as it has a very cold appearance, marked by a predominantly blue colouration. Marla is again depicted in her blue dress from the previous day and is not smoking or wearing glasses or a hat. We can make out her features but the predominant shadows have returned with the confrontation happening almost in silhouette.

Janey Place also looks at the *femme fatale* as

a ghost, *alter ego* or distorted side of man’s personality which will emerge in the dark street at night to destroy him. The sexual, dangerous woman lives in this darkness, and she is the psychological expression of his own internal fears of sexuality, and his need to control and repress it. (1998: 53)

Marla is not this dangerous woman of darkness, the ‘spider woman’ who “weaves a web to trap and finally destroy her young victim” (Place, 1998: 47). At the beginning of the film it looks like she might be. However, she becomes completely innocuous in the course of the film as she becomes Tyler’s sexual plaything and as all her ambiguity dissolves in the cold light of day. She is left looking much more like another trope from *film noir* by the end of the film, the ‘nurturing woman’ role generally occupied by ‘the virgin’:

The opposite female archetype is also found in film noir: woman as redeemer. She offers the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles and identities. She gives love, understanding (or at least
forgiveness), asks very little in return (just that he come back to her) and is generally passive and static. (Place, 1998: 60)

While she may not be Place’s ‘independent woman’ (1998: 57) of film noir, displaying agency in a movement dominated by men, she does display some of its visual hallmarks. As far as her agency is concerned, however, she is merely a pawn and porn. *Film noir* is described as providing “one of the few periods of film in which women are active, not static symbols, are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality” (Place, 1998: 47). As such, *Fight Club* contains none of the female independence to label its female lead a *femme fatale*, and due to the way she is sexually portrayed, she actually loses all her mystery and power as a result, in stark contrast to those who are able to control and utilise their sexuality, such as Tyler. By the end of the film she has lost all agency and appears to have shifted from *femme fatale* to ‘nurturing woman.’
phallus. *Film noir* was characterised by a woman who could be seen as phallic due to her dominant sexuality. This is depicted in the scene by Marla literally possessing a phallic symbol, a large dildo. However, this is merely a superficial sign that has no bearing on her own sexuality, she is not in fact “the ‘phallic woman’ recognisable from film noir” (Stables, 1998:165) but rather the ‘castrated woman’ emblematic of postmodern cinema sampling *film noir* (Stables, 1998:164-5).

Sirens are then heard and the two run out of the building to the house on Paper Street where Marla initiates sex with her statement: “If I fall asleep I’m done for. You’re going to have to keep me up all night.” The sex is shown using photogrammetry, with the still photographs displaying the act in a golden brown glow, each picture presenting the nude Marla, and never Tyler, or a part of her body - her breasts, her foot and her face - with the final shot being the most revealing as it shows her from above, straddling the obscured Tyler. These images are also accompanied by her distorted moaning sounds adding to the ethereal tone of the scene. This creates a scene that is able to project both an actual and sensual occurrence and a dream sequence.

This depiction relates to Kate Stables’ description of the *femme fatale* as ‘love machine’:

> Postmodern cinema fashions the new *femme fatale*, like Swinburne’s Faustine, as a ‘love machine with clockwork joints of pure gold’. It constructs and constrains her with a set of codes imported from pornography, which neutralise or distort the strong and compelling visual presence inherited from classic film noir. (1998: 178)

The use of photogrammetry is particularly noticeable in relation to the invocation of pornography. The use of stills limit Marla’s agency in the scene and literally lays her bare
Fight Club as Homoerotic

There's a blatant homoerotic charge to this identification [of the narrator idolizing Tyler] which the film does not shy away from. ... Shot in a wet dream half light that gilds the men's bodies as they pound each other's heads into the cement, the Fight Club sequences are such a perfect balance of aesthetics and adrenalin.

- Amy Taubin

Critics have contested whether the film is homoerotic or not. Louis Hobson describes:

Palahniuk admits his novel contains homo-erotic overtones and adds that director David Fincher “purposely pushed the envelope. He told me that Fight Club was going to be the most homo-erotic mainstream film ever made. He said it’s all part of the plan to make the audience as uncomfortable as possible so that all the shocks and twists-and-turns of the movie will take them by surprise.” (1999: 9)

However, this claim of the film as homoerotic should not be confused with the characters actually being gay. As Thomas Peele indicates:

My claim here is not that Durden and Jack are really gay. As both the novel and the film make clear, the centre of the tension is Marla Singer. ... The homoerotic element, however, simply will not go away (until the end of the film, when Durden and therefore the homoerotic element is eliminated). Not only is homoerotic sexual and romantic desire one of the main characteristics of the relationship between Jack and Durden, it is also prevalent in many other areas of the film. (2001: 864)

Peele goes on to refer to Tyler’s splicing of penises and porn stills into films and the dildo scene along with Tyler’s gun in the narrator’s mouth as “suggestions of male-on-male fellatio” (2001: 864).

The two situations that provide the most evidence for this reading are the bathroom scene between the narrator and Tyler (Figure 1), and all the men-only groups (support groups, Fight Club and Project Mayhem). In the bathroom scene, the narrator
says, “I can’t get married, I’m a thirty-year-old boy” and Tyler replies, “We’re a
generation of men raised by women. I’m wondering if another woman is really the
answer we need.” The question hangs in the air as Tyler lies naked in the bath and the
narrator crouches in the corner. The next shot is in the kitchen and it shows Tyler walking
in and the narrator stops making coffee and straightens Tyler’s tie. The narrator’s
voiceover states, “Most of the week we were Ozzie and Harriet.” Combining the two
scenes, the kitchen scene appears to follow on from the previous night’s bathroom scene.
The audience is not shown the rest of the evening but Tyler’s last statement and the
reference to ‘America’s favourite couple’ show Tyler and the narrator coded as a happy,
and perhaps even sexual, couple. This is compounded by statements like Tyler’s,
“Something on your mind, dear?” and the two of them bickering like an old married
couple. Tyler also kisses the narrator’s hand to create the chemical burn.

Tyler’s presence causes Sean Lindsay, with the aid of a quote from David
Williams’ *The Sins of a Serial Killer*, to go so far as to refer to him as a ‘homme fatale’:

Because of the narrator’s fascination with Tyler (and because our narrator knows
what Tyler knows), Marla’s role in the film is almost incidental. Tyler is very
much the homme fatale whose charismatic demeanor manipulates the actions of
the narrator. Male sexuality is now as dangerous as female sexuality and
“attractive men are set up to inspire and to receive the gaze of the camera and of
other characters—that sexually appraising gaze formerly reserved for the sexual
woman only.” After all, it is Brad Pitt’s half-naked body that dominates the film.
(2003)

Tyler is explicitly sexualised, he becomes the dangerous other who has everyone desiring
him, with a role similar to his in *Thelma & Louise* (1991).

In relation to the phallic aspect, Tyler also introduces castration anxiety by
referring first to ‘a woman cutting of your penis and throwing it out of a moving car’ and
instigates the cutting of a man’s testicles, first the police commissioners and then the narrator’s when he tries to turn himself in. Tyler then displays his possession of the phallic symbol and the power to castrate by splicing a ‘cut out’ frame of a penis in at the end of the film.

More evidence for this reading of the film as homoerotic lies in the way Marla is depicted sexually. Tyler refers to sex with her as “sport fucking.” As the only developed female character, this does not allow for any other meaningful relationship besides one between men. Nevertheless, the narrator is jealous of others affecting his relationship with Tyler. The narrator is clearly jealous when Tyler closes his door to be with her and describes how he could have changed rooms to escape hearing their lovemaking, and yet he does not. This also allows for a new reading of the statement, “she ruined everything.”

The narrator is obviously also jealous of Tyler’s affection for Angel Face. When Tyler praises Angel Face for a job well done in the hotel bathroom, the narrator states, “I am Jack’s inflamed sense of rejection” and brutally disfigures Angel Face in Fight Club bout for it. The narrator also later sees Tyler’s kiss/chemical burn on Angel Face’s hand. At the same time though, Tyler is coded as heterosexual. When he and the narrator meet on the plane and he poses his ‘question of etiquette,’ he gives the narrator ‘the ass’ and the stewardess ‘the crotch’. Tyler also directly introduces pornography into the narrative. Even though the piece he chooses is a man’s penis, it apparently comes from a strip of heterosexual pornography, judging from the other stills and the accompanying sound effect. He is also shown in a Hustler T-shirt while fighting the narrator in the parking lot. Tyler appears to be forcing the issue of heterosexual pornography to the surface, pointing it out as normal.
However, Tyler is not real, so this evidence can be seen as more indicative of self-love than homoerotic love. Adrienne Redd picks up on this point in reference to the film as not being homoerotic:

The film, though violent and brutally blunt, is remarkably nonsexual. The love in the film is not love between Tyler (or Jack) and Marla, nor is it homoerotic (the idea that heterosexual men need to integrate their feminine side or embrace some of the sensitivity of gay men is completely avoided). There is not a single gay character. There only is the goal of self-love, both in the sense of a well-integrated self and in the sense of the central male character, Jack-Tyler, loving his penis. (2004)

While this reading is factually true, it denies the homoerotic allusions and nuance. It is also unable to grapple with the fact that the two males do function as separate characters for the bulk of the narrative, and it is only at the end of the film that their link is explained and Tyler is dispensed with. This should rather be seen as an escape clause, rather than nullifying everything that has gone before.

The voiceover containing the ‘Ozzie and Harriet’ quote continues with a reference to Fight Club: “But every Saturday night we were finding something out.” The narrator then says: “we were finding out, more and more, that we were not alone.” This reference to solidarity with other men with similar proclivities could also be read as homoerotic.

The next time we see Tyler and the narrator involved in fights, Tyler beats the man who bumps into him on the bus by hitting him repeatedly in the groin. He then gets up, bloodied and reveals his muscular torso (Figure 6). The narrator then gets beaten by a black fighter who lies on top of him and pounds his face into the floor until he submits. The other fighter then gives him a hand up and looks like he is about to embrace him as he asks, “How about next week?” Fight Club itself is charged with male sexuality as men
are forced to fight with “no shirts” and spend their time urging the fighters on as they wait their turn. After the narrator has had his eye examined, he and Tyler are shown in what can only be described as preening. Even though the narrator says, “Fight Club became the reason to cut your hair short or trim your fingernails”, they are still in a bathroom discussing their hair and fingernails. The men’s groups in *Fight Club* are also notable because one deals directly with men’s testicles (testicular cancer support group), another has men taking off their wedding rings to fight in Fight Club, while yet another has them living and sleeping together in Project Mayhem. Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2002) provide a particularly useful and nuanced reading of the film as homoerotic in relation to the DVD’s ‘extra-texts’ such as the DVD commentaries, which they maintain dilute the homoerotic undertones.

As Peele states, by the end of the film, however, the homoeroticism has served no purpose, the homoeroticism is “first reviled and then eliminated” (2001: 865). Through its relation with Tyler and the men’s groups, it has also been linked to self-destruction (Peele, 2001: 864) in a foreign queer space where women have penises and men do not have testicles (Peele, 2001: 867) and where the gender problematising characters, Bob and Tyler, are destroyed (Peele, 2001: 868).

This paves the way for the ending of the narrator and Marla holding hands, “poised to have a normative relationship” (Lee, 2002: 420). Even though Marla has been almost completely peripheral throughout the narrative, her relationship with the narrator is the one that is foregrounded at the end. She has served Laura Mulvey’s description well as “all too often, the erotic function of the woman is represented by the passive, the waiting (Andromeda again), acting above all as a formal closure to the narrative.
structure” (1989: 32). Drawing on Mulvey’s example of the Western, Marla’s ‘integration into society’ is promoted over ‘resistance to social demands and responsibilities’, with ‘marriage and the family and the sphere represented by woman’ being chosen (1989: 34), in this case over self love and the love for other men. As Brookey and Westerfelhaus adequately summarise, *Fight Club* exhibits a form of ‘homosexual erasure,’ by “depicting a relationship that can easily be interpreted as homosexual, incorporat[ing] violence and a heteronormative ending to render the homoeroticism merely homosocial” (2002: 38).
Fight Club and the Older Man in American Beauty

Of the two current films in which buttoned-down businessmen rebel against middle-class notions of masculinity, David Fincher's savage Fight Club is by far the more visionary and disturbing. Where American Beauty hinges on the subversive allure of a rose-covered blond cheerleader, Mr Fincher has something a good deal tougher in mind.

- Janet Maslin

Fight Club is not the only major film to deal with issues surrounding male sexuality, consumerism and paternal influence towards the end of the '90s. In his analysis of American Beauty, Paul Arthur describes a number of films that formed a trend:

In our giddy climate of public gloating about limitless economic prosperity, there is no denying the surface appeal of movies aiming to skewer vulgar manifestations of status and rampant materialism ... Of course, rather than directly attack the gospel according to Dow Jones, Hollywood and its indie franchises summon the shopworn ancillary proxies of suburban ennui, the success myth, and heedless consumerism, spiked with trendier evils of oppressive gender roles and sexual dysfunction ... American Beauty shares not only core ideological assumptions but also similar dramatic situations, character types, and allegorical yearnings with films as otherwise disparate as Fight Club, Being John Malkovich, Happiness, In the Company of Men and, in un-ironic register, Bringing Out the Dead. In each case, an outrageously depersonalising, meaningless, and/or coercive job triggers or merely augments an extreme acting out of individual pathologies related to confusingly repressive demands of masculine performance. (2000: 51)

Fight Club can therefore be seen as part of a greater movement to account for its 'middle-class-male-in-crisis' and 'oppressive gender roles and sexual dysfunction' in spite of economic prosperity. However, Arthur also points out these films' inability to address real issues. They merely become easy shots at 'shopworn' targets.

A look at American Beauty is particularly useful in this study because its male protagonist is facing similar issues to Fight Club's narrator, but at a later stage of life.
American Beauty’s Lester Burnham is 42 years old as opposed to Fight Club’s narrator who is thirty. Carolyn and Lester could also be seen as Marla and the narrator a few years on had they not blown up the buildings, or perhaps this is how they turn out anyway.

As Deacy writes, “Like Fight Club, [American Beauty] is also about an ‘everyman’” (2002: 66) but Lester Burnham is firmly settled into family life. His picture-perfect house in the suburbs, rose bushes and a Camry in the driveway have replaced the narrator’s apartment in Fight Club while a $4000 sofa upholstered in Italian silk replaces the Fight Club narrator’s Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern.

However, Lester’s condition is still much the same. Lester’s situation also strikingly resembles Bly’s description of the emasculated adult male with “two Toyotas and a mortgage, maybe a wife and a child” (1990: 10). Lester also feels powerless in his job.

He is frustrated by the “emotional sleepwalking that passes for life in the American suburb” (Hentzi, 2001: 46) and feels unable to do anything about it. Through his omniscient narration he asks the audience to take a stern look at what his life has amounted to: “In a way I’m dead already. Look at me, jerking off in the shower. This will be the high point of my day. It’s all downhill from here.”

His job as an advertisement salesman for a sports magazine supplies little fulfilment and he describes it as: “consist[ing] of basically masking my contempt for the assesholes in charge and at least once a day retiring to the men’s room so I can jerk off while I fantasize about a life that doesn’t so closely resemble hell.” The offices in Fight Club (Figure 14) also closely resemble those in American Beauty (Figure 15), cubicles with computer screens and telephones bathed in fluorescent light. Both men also find themselves confronted by authoritarian bosses with whom they cannot relate. Lester does
not even have a face-to-face stand off with his “fascist” boss; instead he has to deal with
him through Brad, an efficiency expert who ends up dismissing him. However, both the
narrator from Fight Club and Lester manage to have their way with the system at the end;
both men fabricate harassment charges and receive payouts, with benefits. When Brad
calls Lester a “twisted fuck”, Lester is able to account for himself and his actions plainly
as he describes himself as “just an ordinary guy with nothing to lose.” He sees his job as
adding nothing valuable to his life and therefore relinquishes the power it has over him.

Figure 14.

Figure 15.
He then chooses to go back to the job he had as a youngster, ‘flipping burgers.’ To Lester, this represents the “least amount of responsibility” he can think of and takes him back to a simple stage in his life. This move to become a “born-again proletarian” (Jackson, 2000: 40) comes into focus when he recalls this stage in his life to Ricky, but this does little more than indicate the gap between the two generations to Ricky:

LESTER
You know when I was your age I flipped burgers all summer just to be able to buy an 8-track.

RICKY
That sucks.

LESTER
No, actually it was great. All I did was party and get laid. I had my whole life ahead of me.

However, his decisions in the past and in the present have implications for those around him. To begin with, his relationship with his only child, Jane, is almost non-existent. When Carolyn forces him to watch her cheerleading performance he whines about having to miss the James Bond marathon on TNT. This can clearly be read as the equivalent of the clichéd busy father missing his son’s big sports game.

As Lester becomes reawakened from his ‘sedation’ he tries to reconnect with her and says: “I’m sorry I haven’t been more available. What happened, we used to be pals?”

By this stage, though, Jane has become completely estranged. The extent to which Jane feels this separation from her remote father is expressed in the opening lines of the film:
JANE
I need a father who’s a role model, not some horny geek boy who’s gonna spray his shorts every time I bring a girlfriend home from school. What a lame-o. Someone really should just put him out of his misery.

RICKY
Want me to kill him for you?

JANE
Yeah, would you?

Even though Jane later says she is just joking about killing him, her disappointment still remains. She desperately wants a father who is present in her life, someone she can look up to as a role model, and Lester’s job and lifestyle do little to impress her. Having ‘hardly spoken to her in months,’ Lester strongly resembles the rendering of the ‘remote father’ already explored.

Ricky is able to understand her feelings and is particularly insightful in his response, while Jane slowly comes around to his meaning:

JANE
He’s a total asshole. He’s got this crush on my friend Angela and it’s disgusting.

RICKY
You’d rather he had the crush on you?

JANE
Gross, no. But it’d be nice if I was anywhere near as important to him as she is. I know you think my dad’s harmless, but you’re wrong. He’s doing massive psychological damage to me.

While avoiding her implication into an Electra complex, the female version of the Oedipal, what she clearly wants is discipline, for her father to display some self-discipline in relation to her friend and for him to discipline her and in so doing show her
that he cares about her enough to discipline her. She is clearly missing physical contact and attention. This, obviously, also mirrors the narrator from *Fight Club*’s desire to be disciplined by his boss. However, when Lester does come around, it is too late, Jane is antagonistic towards his attempts at ‘showing an active interest in her’ and would rather run away or joke about killing him.

In the other example of a dysfunctional father/child relationship in the film, the one between Col. Fitts and Ricky, the discipline Jane yearns for is present, but in this case it is oppressive and uncomprehending and still leaves an estranged child. The Colonel is depicted as “violent and reactionary” (Jackson, 2000: 40), a man who spends his leisure time watching old war films or collecting war memorabilia like the Nazi plate. He is in complete denial of his son’s real life involving drug use and their superficial father/son relationship means that he cannot relate to his son on a meaningful level. As he hesitates in the doorway to his son’s room at one point, his desire to connect with his son is clearly evident, but he is unable to and merely walks away. When his father beats him up, Ricky also restrains himself and does not fight back, similar to the fight between Lou and Tyler in *Fight Club*. Again in a similar way to *Fight Club*, the fight between father figure and son breaks the power the father has over the son and the son gets what he needs to leave. In Ricky’s case, his father’s violence towards him shows that they can no longer live under the same roof. Ricky has enough money to leave, friends who will set him up and a girlfriend with whom to carry on a ‘normal’ life without his parents, so he leaves. His final words to his father are a resounding denouncement of the man he has become, “What a sad old man you are.”
The mothers in the film are also of little help to their children. Carolyn is depicted as adopting an extremely disciplined work ethic, which has resulted in her repressing her emotions to the extent that she also becomes cut off from her daughter. She does, however, seem to be more attentive than Lester, as can be seen in her knowledge of the importance of Jane’s cheerleading performance. Carolyn has become a victim of self-help books and her adoration of the ‘Real Estate King,’ Buddy Kane, in her quest for success. Her involvement with Buddy leads to her own sexual reawakening and the feeling of empowerment she gets from firing a gun. However, as Erica Arthur points out, her awakening is set in stark contrast to Lester’s:

The ways in which Carolyn’s self-discovery is undermined extend beyond the farcical, cartoon-like manner in which she conducts her affair. Set against Lester’s dope smoking and his penchant for seventies music, which are framed within the context of liberal nostalgia and youthful innocence, Carolyn’s self-reinvention through shooting guns is not just presented as conservative but is imbued with fascistic undertones. (2004: 133)

Fascism is again evoked as Arthur aligns Carolyn and Colonel Fitts through “the deployment of parallel scenes that are suggestive of their shared personality tendencies” (2004: 133). This includes Carolyn embracing gun use, Ricky showing Jane his father’s Nazi plate, and Carolyn hitting Jane just before Colonel Fitts hits Ricky (Arthur, 2004: 133).

Buddy can also be seen in contrast to Lester. Buddy is “[e]mpowered through his financial standing, sexual relationships, and enthusiasm for armed weapons, Buddy is cast as the epitome of conservative masculinity” (Arthur, 2004: 134). However, he has also failed to sustain his romantic relationship in the film, his trophy wife leaves him because he works too hard and he distances himself from Carolyn because of public
perception. He therefore falls victim to his own success and he is left an emotionless character who drives off alone.

Ricky’s mother, on the other hand, is completely incapable of being involved in her son’s life. All she ever seems to do is stare off blankly into the distance. She also maintains, or rather we assume that she does, an immaculate home that she still claims is a mess. She is therefore depicted as being obsessively concerned with appearances and only shows a basic level of meaningful engagement with her son, for example, telling him to wear a jacket when he is about to run away from home.

Lester’s frustrations are also evident in his position in the home, which subverts the norm of the father as dominant in the household. Erica Arthur describes the representation of the house as a jail:

The 1950s stereotype of the oppressed suburban housewife is inverted, as it is Lester who is shown to be the victim of domestic containment … Watching his wife tend to her flowers as he looks out onto the street from behind the barred, first floor window, Lester is literally imprisoned by his marriage. The thorny presence of the roses, which bolster the white picket fence surrounding the house, allude to barbwire security barriers that prevent Lester escaping his marital sentence, while Carolyn, as the person who nurtures the flowers, is cast as his prison keeper. (2004: 136)

The signifiers that depict the family as perfect, such as the roses and picket fence, have turned against Lester, forming a jail. This can be seen through the mise-en-scene with Lester framed in the window, staring out at his wife talking to Jim about her roses (Figure 16). This passive and submissive position is also depicted in the way Lester is “relegated to the back of the car while Carolyn takes the driving seat” (Arthur, 2004: 136), in a literal illustration of her dominance in running the household.
As a result of his submissive position, Lester comes to realise that, "Both my wife and my daughter think I am this gigantic loser, and they're right. I have lost something, and I'm not exactly sure what it is, but I know I didn't always feel this sedated. But you know what? It's never too late to get it back." Lester later restates this as "I feel like I've been in a coma for about 20 years and I'm just now waking up." His realisation is sparked off first by his infatuation with Angela Hayes, Jane's friend, and then his friendship with the 18-year old Ricky as they begin to teach him things about himself the way Tyler teaches the narrator in Fight Club.

Lester's relationship with Ricky is at its most poignant in the scene outside the real estate function. Cutting from the tight, colourful interior shot of Carolyn and Buddy, to a long shot of a stark, shadowy scene outside, the scene plays out against a flat wall with only the door breaking it (Figure 17). Lester and Ricky stand to one side, with only the occasional shadow breaking the surface.
This space is a liminal one; these characters are able to step out of time and space, escape the authority and pretentiousness present inside, to an outer space where they can be themselves and talk calmly and naturally as contemporaries. This becomes a peripheral space, similar to the house on Paper Street in *Fight Club*. This allows for the male bonding that the presence of women and authority figures does not allow for, in something similar to a Robert Bly all male retreat.

This space is punctured twice, once by Ricky’s boss (Figure 17) and once by Carolyn. Ricky stands up to his boss’s intrusion and tells him he is quitting while Lester merely submits to Carolyn. Lester is clearly impressed by the way Ricky has stood up for himself and proclaims him as his ‘own personal hero.’ By the end of the film, Ricky is the only character who is treated sensitively, without looking as if he will be permanently damaged by the events displayed. As Hentzi implies, this appears to be the result of the Mendes’ film becoming “a portrait of the artist as a young boy” (2001: 49-50) with Ricky being depicted as the young filmmaker.
Lester’s feelings for Angela rekindle his sexuality, which makes him more aware of his body. He begins to exercise and run with the Jims, and his relationship with Ricky allows him to reconnect with his youth of ‘flipping burgers,’ taking drugs, listening to music and perhaps even his dream of having a red 1970 Pontiac Firebird. Ricky is probably also the inspiration that he needs to quit his job, as he does so immediately after he has seen Ricky defy his boss and quit. This newfound sense of freedom and empowerment allows Lester to stand up to Carolyn and begin to become dominant in the household. This is clearly shown in his outburst at the dinner table where he throws the bowl of asparagus against the wall, what Arthur calls his “bourgeois projectile” (2004: 135) in his petty suburban revolution. However, as Erica Arthur points out, his statements concerning material possessions could be read as contradictory (2004: 135). As Spector and Wills also point out, statements such as Lester’s, “It’s just a couch. This isn’t life. This is just stuff, and it’s become more important to you than living. Well, honey, that’s just nuts” should be held alongside his own desire to buy things like the Firebird as well as his use of recreational drugs and his severance pay check (2007: 295). The audience is left poised to marvel at American Beauty as “an exploration of the limits of consumerism and the aesthetics of materialism” (Spector & Wills, 2007: 295) with the empty shopping bag fluttering in the breeze. This apparently “signif[ies] emptiness of capitalism and that the beautiful can be empty because you don’t need to possess it” (Spector & Wills, 2007: 296). However, it is important to remember that consumerism still created the bag. The ‘revolution’ is therefore still implicated with capitalism.

There are also critics who are quick to identify religious themes in the film, in a manner similar to Fight Club. Critics tend to refer to Lester’s “transfiguration” in the last
scene (Deacy, 2002: 69) and also note the references to a ‘benevolent force behind things.’ References such as these encourage religious readings of the film that tend also to refer back to views on capitalism. Spector and Wills, for example, make this link explicit by describing *American Beauty* as “a cultural signifier/marker for America’s current quest for spiritual meaning in the midst of overwhelming materialism” (2007: 279).

*American Beauty* can also be seen as being characterised by ‘deviant’ sexuality; Lester’s lifestyle has left him unable to sexually function in a regular way with his wife and instead he fantasises about his young daughter’s friend. Towards the end of the film he begins to respond to his wife sexually but she rebuffs him. However, the film does not follow through with its sexual deviancy, Lester does not actually have sex with Angela or Ricky.

As he is about to die, Lester looks at a family photograph that shows him, Jane and Carolyn, all looking happy. As he gazes at it and smiles, he appears to have reached a “Buddhist notion of acceptance” (Arthur, 2000: 52) as he has “move[d] towards a place of redemption” (Kemp, 2000: 26). He is able to see the beauty behind things and is reassured by something reminiscent of Ricky’s sense that there is a benevolent force telling him not to be afraid. As he lies dying, seeing flashes of his youth, he seems happy. This, along with his various attempts at recapturing his youth, has led commentators to call his journey childish and an attempt to become a child again, but this does not really ring true with the film as a whole. He seems genuinely happy at the end, happy to have a daughter and a wife and happy with these responsibilities. Those things that have brought him unhappiness are his job and the desire for material things running his life. He seems
much more eager to recapture the attitude he had as a child, rather than the life of one. This tone is picked up by Erica Arthur who reads *American Beauty* as a depiction of “[t]he white middle-class male’s desire to wrestle the limelight from more deserving victims [which] conjures the impression of a childish temper tantrum” (2004: 139). While the reduction can be seen as rather condescending, it does identify the attitude of the film, a rebellious one that foregrounds the ‘plight’ of the white middle-class male’s attempt at shirking responsibility on his path to self-rediscovery at the expense of everyone else, or every ‘other,’ while his revolution ends up looking rather petty.

Philip Kemp labels *American Beauty* a fable (2000: 26) along with Paul Arthur who states that it displays “the characters’ journeys of self-discovery while reminding us not to take them too seriously because, after all, this is a comic fable, not a realistic portrait of contemporary malaise” (2000: 52). Christopher Deacy, on the other hand, sees it functioning as a ‘contemporary parable’ (2002: 67). These terms display a need on behalf of the critics to account for its non-realistic aspects, the ways it does not really get its hands dirty with actual details in favour of an attractive and superficial gloss of events, relegating it to a category akin to myth.

In a manner quite similar to *Fight Club*, *American Beauty* depicts a complete withdrawal from proper political engagement in favour of the personal, with the narrative being, “contained within the relative safety of the office, home, or all-white, unnamed suburban neighbourhood” (Arthur, 2004: 129-30). Sexual deviance is also hinted at, but not followed through on, and by the end of the film the rebellious characters have either been killed off (Lester), or seem poised to adopt normal lives (Carolyn, Ricky and Jane) in suburban society. This platform allows for what Paul Arthur terms Lester’s “hippest
sort of regression” (2000: 52), a regression that still manages to look good on screen and function as a neatly closed narrative, while not being particularly transgressive. This can also be said of *Fight Club.*
Chapter Three: The Wisdoms

Roger Ebert described *Fight Club* as “a thrill ride masquerading as philosophy – the kind of ride where some people puke and others can’t wait to get on again” (1999). The juxtaposition of thrill rides and philosophy seems strange, and yet, the comparison seems apt when applied to *Fight Club*. The reason for this is the way *Fight Club* freely and swiftly samples a vast numbers of philosophical frames of thought, political persuasions, religious doctrines and psychoanalytic perspectives. This is done with such voracity that the number of references becomes quite overwhelming and perhaps nauseating. However, these avenues of thought are not applied comprehensively, and rather referenced in a pop-cultural way, picking up and dropping signifiers along the way that critics seize and assume are carried throughout the entire narrative. This is one of the main reasons for the differing and often contradictory viewpoints expressed about the film. These viewpoints are often both true, but only with regard to a particular part of the narrative. To account for every reference would be too exhaustive for this study; however, some major aspects are picked up on by most critics and some are dealt with more extensively than others. The major references selected for this study include the religious, which incorporates God, the second dominant authority figure to be overcome, the psychoanalytic and the work of Friedrich Nietzsche as well as Marxist and Anarchist political perspectives.
God's Unwanted Child

_The movie is not only anti-capitalist but anti-society and, indeed, anti-God._
- Alexander Walker

Accusations have been levelled at _Fight Club_ from many religious angles as was stated in the introduction. However, this generally appears to be part of an initial knee-jerk reaction to the film’s antagonistic manner with regards to all forms of spirituality. This issue is far more complex than most critics acknowledge, however, and the film needs to be investigated closely before accusations can be made.

In _Fight Club_, religion and spirituality are dealt with in two ways: the narrator engages with new age spirituality through the support groups he attends, while Tyler forces him to directly address his Judeo-Christian conception of God. Initially the narrator merely attends the support groups to ail his insomnia, as a way of surrounding himself with caring people who listen to him and allow him to cry and then sleep. While there, though, he allows himself to engage with their principles, such as the retreat into his cave to find his power animal. This is depicted in an authentic manner, he does find his power animal and it does give him useful advice. The penguin’s advice is also similar to Tyler’s: that he should let unimportant things in his life ‘slide.’ He also acknowledges the potential that practices like meditation can actually help people, as it helps Chloe to make peace with the fact that she is going to die. He also attempts to apply these practises in his own life when battling to deal with the pain of the chemical burn, saying, “If guided meditation worked for cancer, it can work for this.” So the narrator appears to buy
into these practices helping people, he does sleep and Chloe does find peace. So, from the outset, the film depicts a fairly positive perspective of this form of religion.

*Fight Club* also has other religious elements infused into its narrative. We are told that the testicular cancer support group takes place in First Methodist Church. When the narrator leaves the front of a church, after first introducing us to Marla in the cancer group, bells chime as she walks away. Then, a few moments later, we are shown the exterior of a church and the next shot is of another group, the one that uses guided meditation, and we find ourselves inside a space that again looks like a church. While bells are heard chiming, the leader says, “To begin tonight’s communion…” At one point the narrator also makes reference to ‘the heart chakra’ that was originally a Hindu principle but has since been appropriated by, amongst others, the New Age movement. The list of support groups that the narrator tears off the wall also has a St. Christopher Episcopal Church header. When he has the epiphany that ‘losing all hope was freedom,’ we can also hear what sounds like monks chanting in the background. So, throughout this section of the film new age spirituality is being collapsed into Christianity. This blends the various kinds of spirituality present into one broad understanding that can be easily attacked by Tyler under the heading ‘God.’

However, the narrator’s spirituality-based serenity is shown to be fragile. His ability to find rest in the support groups is disturbed by the entrance of Marla, as he is unable to cry when she is present, and as a result he is again unable to sleep. His peace has come about in a religious setting, but it is not an authentic religious experience. His inauthenticity is provoked by Marla’s inauthenticity. Her disturbing effect on his spirituality is again exhibited later in the film when he discovers that Marla is sleeping
with Tyler. While violently brushing his teeth he says: “I became the calm little center of
the world. I was the Zen master.” In that moment he is clearly not ‘Zen,’ he is clearly
very upset by her presence and his spirituality appears to be of little use to him.

Tyler, however, is much more direct about his relationship with spirituality,
repeatedly making direct reference to God. This is particularly evident in the chemical
burn sequence. When Tyler is forcing the narrator to confront the intense pain in his
hand, the narrator attempts to use his newfound new-age spirituality to transcend the
pain, using mediation:

NARRATOR
I’m going to my cave. I’m going to my cave to find my power animal.

TYLER
No, don’t deal with this the way those dead people do. Come on!

NARRATOR
I get the point, okay, please!

TYLER
No, what you’re feeling is premature enlightenment.
... This is the greatest moment of your life, man, and you’re off somewhere
missing it.

Tyler refuses to let the narrator bypass the experience on some higher plane, denying
what is really happening; he forces him to accept the pain as an inevitable part of his life
and in so doing connect with life more completely. Tyler then realises that he needs to
address the narrator’s spirituality more directly:

TYLER
Shut up! Our fathers were our models for God. And if our fathers bailed,
what does that tell you about God?
(Cut to the ice cave with Marla in place of the penguin)
Listen to me. You have to consider the possibility that God doesn't like you. He never wanted you. In all probability, he hates you. This is not the worst thing that can happen…

NARRATOR

It isn’t?

TYLER

We don’t need him.

NARRATOR

We don’t, we don’t, I agree.

TYLER

Fuck damnation, man. Fuck redemption. We are God’s unwanted children? So be it!

In saying this, Tyler is able to place God in physical terms as a being, like his father, with frailties and weaknesses. He is also highlighting the narrator’s abandonment issues, forcing the narrator to become self-reliant because, just like his absent father, God was not able to help him develop. However, we are never shown exactly how religious the narrator was to begin with, whether he actually ever fully believed in God, or whether Tyler merely uses this as an easy target in the narrator’s life to prove a point.

Later, while addressing the members of Fight Club, Tyler states that, “Our great war is a spiritual war.” His use of ‘spiritual’ is strange, and seems without basis. It only appears to make sense when understood to mean that he sees it as a war against the spiritual or a war of the spirit overcoming obstacles, not a war between spirits or for a spirit, in the religious sense.

The Fight Club meetings begin to take the place of spirituality in the narrator’s life, and in a sense it becomes his church: “Fight Club wasn’t about winning or losing. It wasn’t about words. The hysterical shouting was in tongues, like at a Pentecostal church.
When the fight was over, nothing was solved, but nothing mattered. Afterwards we all felt saved.” He receives his feeling of salvation from being beaten (he says this while being beaten by the black fighter) and his communion is with men who feel the same way he does. Tyler can also be seen as an incarnation of the leader from the testicular cancer support group with Tyler’s reiteration of, “I look around this room and I see....”

Fight Club has become a substitution of one ‘religion’ with another: the narrator’s apparent belief in God is replaced by the self-help groups which are replaced by Fight Club which is replaced by Project Mayhem. Project Mayhem becomes a type of cult with all its members dressed in uniform and worshipping Tyler as their God while chanting his mantras. Their mantra becomes “In Tyler we trust,” which is said by the narrator once they all start moving into the house that becomes their commune. As Deacy writes, “Indeed, part of the recruitment exercise requires of those who want to join to be ritually humiliated, punished, and offered no food or encouragement for a symbolic period of three days before they can be admitted into the fold” (2002: 63).

The narrator’s loss of faith in religion can also be linked back to Hassan’s postmodern features that include ‘decanonization’ with its constituent element, the ‘death of god’ and the way this plays into the general desire to “deconstruct the languages of power” (1986: 505). This shows a loss of belief in power structures and master narratives in favour of narratives with their emphasis on fragmented subjectivity and ones open to interpretation. However, Fight Club merely substitutes one god for another with the deification of Tyler, and one power structure for another as Fight Club and Project Mayhem take the place of organised religion.
Christopher Deacy and Stefanie Remlinger also look at *Fight Club* as directly linking religion with violence. As Remlinger indicates, after his fight with Lou, “Tyler is then picked up by his men in a short ‘crucifixion’ scene symbolising not only that Tyler has taken upon himself all the suffering for his men, but also that he is now their undisputed spiritual leader” (2001: 144). Remlinger also posits that the film 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” (2001: 151-2), while Deacy describes the narrator as a Christ-figure (2002: 63) and the members of Project Mayhem as a replication of his twelve disciples (Deacy, 2002: 64).

Another intersection with religion occurs with the introduction of the penguin, even though critics overlook this. In his ‘One-Dimensional Men: *Fight Club* and the Poetics of the Body,’ Asbjorn Gronstad does attempt to address the penguin, however, his reading is rather superficial and ‘one-dimensional’ itself, overlooking its religious significance. In what he describes as the narrator’s “meditative moment” (2003: 10) he sees “an only moderately successful act of self-examination on the part of the puzzled male subject” (2003: 10). He goes on to write:

Jack sees a penguin, a benevolent but ludicrous being that becomes an urgently appropriate image of the masculine predicament in *Fight Club*. The animal’s connotational values starkly negate the dream of empowerment and agency that Jack desires, and at the same time the figure of the penguin also serves as a mirror of Jack’s entrapment. A bird incapable of flight, the penguin provides an especially resonant symbol of processes of environmental dislocation and costly adaptability. (2003: 10)
The first aspect that needs to be addressed is that for Gronstad this as a volitional exploit on behalf of the narrator. It is in fact not; he is merely following the support group leader’s instructions, in an environment that he does not appear to believe in. If anything he seems antagonistic and cynical towards it through his body language and tone of voice; he is merely there for the opportunity at the end when he is able to cry. If anything, he is merely along for the ride.

Gronstad then reads the penguin as if it were purely a construct of the narrator’s own imagination, one that can be read through simple connotations, as a mirror of the narrator’s own ‘entrapment’ (2003: 10). As such, the penguin appears weak and impotent.

The penguin is in fact quite the opposite. According to Shamanism, the belief system from which the concept of the ‘power animal’ stems, the power animal is a guide, not a symbol:

Shamans believe that everyone has power animals – animal spirits which reside with each individual adding to their power and protecting them from illness, acting similarly to a guardian angel. Each power animal that you have increases your power so that illnesses or negative energy cannot enter your body. The spirit also lends you the wisdom of its kind. (Torres, 2002)

This can also be seen in relation to Freud’s observations in Totem and Taboo (1950). While continuing with the work done by Frazer, Freud quotes Frazer’s three kinds of totems. The first and second kinds are the ‘clan totem,’ which are shared by the whole clan, and the ‘sex totem,’ which is shared by either sex. The third kind is “the individual totem, belonging to a single individual and not passing to his descendants” (Freud, 1950:
The totem is also described as helping in sickness and delivering omens and warnings (Freud, 1950: 105), which can be seen as very similar to the shamanic reading. The penguin has particular significance to the narrator. According to Shamanism, the penguin's wisdom lies in the areas of “Fatherhood, Understanding female energy within the male, Waking dreams, Astral Projection, Patience [and] Endurance” (Animal Spirits Homepage). Provided with this insight, the penguin becomes remarkably significant in the way it 'talks' (power animals are described as literally speaking to the individuals in their dreams) of fatherhood, female energy within the male and waking dreams, all particularly pertinent on the narrator’s path towards enlightenment, rather than an animal that cannot fly (as if flight was the only measure of freedom and swimming never considered), or a ‘resonant symbol of processes of environmental dislocation and costly adaptability.’

However, the penguin also forms another link in the narrative - that of fatherhood. Freud states that “totemism is a system which takes the place of a religion among certain primitive peoples of Australia, America and Africa, and provides the basis of their social organization” (1950: 100). He also goes on to make a connection between totemism and fatherhood. In looking at the case of Árpád, a young boy who is fixated on the ‘fowl house’ and the reproduction of fowl, Freud first states this connection:

These observations justify us, in my opinion, in substituting the father for the totem animal in the formula for totemism (in the case of males). It will be observed that there is nothing new or particularly daring in this step forward. Indeed, primitive men say the very same thing themselves, and, where the totemic system is still in force today, they describe the totem as their common ancestor and primal father. (1950: 131)

This is then also related to the Oedipus complex and the desire to kill the father:
If the totem animal is the father, then the two principle ordinances of totemism, the two taboo prohibitions which constitute its core – not to kill the totem and not to have sexual relations with a woman of the same totem – coincide in their content with the two crimes of Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother, as well as with the two primal wishes of children, the insufficient repression or the re-awakening of which forms the nucleus of perhaps every psychoneurosis. (Freud, 1950: 132)

As Freud continues, “[a] new creation such as this [totemism], derived from what constitutes the root of every form of religion – a longing for the father” (1950: 148) and that the absent father also affected other aspects of social organisation as well (1950: 149). In relating this back to *Fight Club*, it is clear that the spirituality inherent in totemism and the belief in power animals are closely linked to the concept of the absent fathers, with spirituality becoming a substitute.
Tyler as Nietzschean Teacher

*Tyler Durden [sounds] like a man who tripped over the Nietzsche display on the way to the coffee bar in Borders.*

- Roger Ebert

Critics also tend to refer to Tyler as Nietzschean. This link stems from Tyler’s constant use of aphorisms such as “The things you own, end up owning you”, “I say never be complete. I say let’s evolve, let the chips fall where they may”, “Self improvement is masturbation”, “Without pain or sacrifice, we would have nothing” and “It’s only after we have lost everything that we are free to do anything.” To understand this label in more detail, though, and to understand how Tyler works as a teacher, it is necessary to look at how the narrator and Tyler are introduced.

When Tyler explains what job he does and how he views the illusion of safety on flights the narrator is clearly impressed. After the narrator calls him the most interesting ‘single-serving friend’ he has ever met, he feels the need to explain his phrase. Tyler, in his wisdom, shows that he understands and says:

TYLER

That’s very clever.

NARRATOR

Thank you.

TYLER

How’s that working out for you?

NARRATOR

What?

TYLER

Being clever.
Even though he does not acknowledge it here, the narrator has realised that his ‘being clever’ is not working out for him and he is actually very frustrated and unhappy.

Ironically, it is quite obvious that Tyler sees himself as ‘clever’ as well.

To begin with, it is important to understand the role that Tyler Durden plays - the emphasis here being on ‘role,’ since an exploration of his character as a unified coherent one is very difficult and elusive, if at all even possible. As Fincher describes, Tyler’s role in the film is a complex one, and different from his role in the novel:

In the book, Tyler’s already been on the journey. He’s waiting impatiently for the narrator to make the same trip that he has. And that was a thing we consciously got rid of. … You have to have a guy that’s going … “But it’s up to you – maybe I’m wrong.” (Smith, 1999: 61)

It is only possible to understand Tyler in direct relation to the narrator. Tyler is constantly and fairly haphazardly pointing the narrator in directions in relation to where he is at that moment, without necessarily having a grand plan in mind. Tyler, through what he does, what he says and even through the way he looks, sets an ever-changing example for the narrator that allows the narrator to move closer to the narrator’s own personal maturity and enlightenment.

Tyler does this predominantly through his radical and sage-like statements, which are generally associated with the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. Smith describes how “Durden, with his outlandish self-presentation and ersatz-Nietzschean pronouncements, is
everything our narrator isn’t. He answers to nobody, sees through the hypocrisies and
agreed deceptions of modern life” (1999: 58). Fincher himself also makes this connection
and goes on to refer specifically to the links between Tyler and Nietzsche’s übermensch,
roughly translated as ‘the Superman’:

[Fight Club is] not about tricking you, it’s a metaphor, it’s not about a real guy
who really blows up buildings, it’s about a guy who’s led to feel this might be the
answer based on all the confusion and rage that he’s suffered and it’s from that
frustration and bottled rage that he creates Tyler. And he goes through a natural
process of experimenting with notions that are complicated and have moral and
ethical implications that the Nietzschean übermensch doesn’t have to answer to.
(Fincher in Smith, 1999: 62-5)

As a result Tyler and the Nietzschean Superman exist in the realm of abstract morality, in
the philosophy of life rather than the actual reality of everyday existence. Tyler’s
pronouncements work in the realm of theoretical concepts and experimentation but result
in problems in practice when it comes to ethics and morality, as the narrator later realises.
As Amy Taubin notes, “Tyler is the embodiment of pure id with just enough Nietzsche
thrown in to make him articulate” (1999: 16). The pronouncements allow for a theoretical
framework through which the narrator can conceptually confront his frustrations and
rage, even though these resolutions are, as in the case of the id, not necessarily solutions
that can be instituted in civilised society.

It is therefore necessary to understand some of the basics of Nietzsche’s
instruction. Both teachers, Tyler and Zarathustra (who describes the Superman), are
concerned with ‘the becoming’ of an individual. While Nietzsche refers to the Superman
throughout his works, his ideas are most succinctly articulated in the Prologue to Thus
Spake Zarathustra:
*I teach you the Superman.* Man is something that is to be surpassed…

Once blasphemy against God was the highest blasphemy; but God died and therewith also those blasphemers. …

It is not your sin - it is your self-satisfaction that crieth unto heaven …

Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman - a rope over an abyss. (Nietzsche, 1909: 6-9) (Author’s emphasis)

This description is easily applicable to the narrator’s frustrations with the consumerist existence he finds himself immersed in. With Tyler’s help he learns that he needs to ‘surpass his old self,’ to overcome his fetters and reach the next stage in his development. Here Zarathustra has acknowledged that on man’s path towards his next stage of development he needs to acknowledge that “God is dead” (Nietzsche, 1974: 108, 125) and that he no longer needs to be concerned with blaspheming against him. The narrator, with the help of Tyler, also learns this. Zarathustra teaches, as does Tyler, that it is man’s ‘self-satisfaction’ that is the real ‘sin’ that cries out to heaven. In *Fight Club*, this is depicted through the ‘satisfaction’ that has come about through the belief that material possessions lead to happiness and that this is indeed not the case. As Fincher states, the narrator has been taught that possessions and a perfect image will bring him fulfilment, that through “your furniture and your car and your clothes, you’ll find happiness. And he hasn’t” (Smith, 1999: 60). The narrator is not happy and his satisfaction is hollow. He needs to develop and evolve (with the reference here to the evolution from ape to man being an intentional one).

However, Zarathustra also teaches that it is not through reaching towards ‘higher’ ideals that man reaches this next stage, it is actually though his ‘down-going’ that it is achieved:
What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal: what is lovable in man is that he is an over-going and a down-going. …

I love him who is of a free spirit and a free heart: thus is his head only the bowels of his heart; his heart, however, causes his down-going.

I love all who are heavy drops falling one by one out of the dark cloud that lowereth over man: they herald the coming of the lightning, and succumb as heralds.

Lo, I am a herald of the lightning, and a heavy drop out of the cloud: the lightning, however, is the Superman.’ (Nietzsche, 1909: 9-11)

As if taking the place of John the Baptist heralding the coming of Jesus, Zarathustra heralds the coming of the Superman, the evolution of man into the Superman. The ‘down-going’ comes about not through wanting to strive for Godly traits, but instead to engage with earthly things completely. This is shown through references to ‘remaining true to the earth,’” the ‘bowels of one’s heart’ and finally the heavy drop falling to earth. This connection is extended to those desires thought of as base or low, including self-complacency and sin. It is this ‘down-going’ that brings man closer to his actualisation as the Superman.

_Fight Club_ also contains many references to a ‘down-going.’ After the narrator fights with Marla to get rid of her after she has had sex with Tyler, Tyler uses the following lesson:

**NARRATOR**

Why do you still waste time with her?

**TYLER**

I'll say this about Marla: at least she's trying to hit bottom.

**NARRATOR**

What? And I'm not?

**TYLER**

Sticking feathers up your butt does not make you a chicken.
The narrator’s attempt to ‘hit bottom’ is therefore displayed as false, just as his half-hearted yearning for death was displayed as false. Straight after this conversation they make soap and Tyler gives the narrator the chemical burn on his hand. As the narrator lies on the ground in pain, Tyler says: “Congratulations, you’re one step closer to hitting bottom.”

This theme of ‘down-going’ is also shown spatially in the film. The first Fight Club that is started is started in the basement of Lou’s Tavern. Project Mayhem also starts in the basement of the house on Paper Street when Tyler starts building the space monkeys bunk beds below the house. The space monkeys are also shown in relation to the ground: when Bob dies Angel Face suggests they bury him in the garden and they are also shown tending to the garden. Project Mayhem’s largest assault is also as a result of the bombs planted in the basements of the credit card companies, again below ground.

The two exceptions to this occur at the beginning and the end of the film. At the beginning the narrator meets Tyler while flying in an aeroplane that he has just fantasised would crash as the result of a mid-air collision. At the end of the film, when the narrator kills Tyler, they are at the top of a skyscraper. The narrator creates Tyler when he cannot continue the way he is and is in desperate need of him to bring him down to earth and the ending displays the narrator breaking from Tyler’s teachings and killing him. The film therefore displays a recurrent theme of Tyler’s teachings being related to a ‘down-going.’

The logical reading of this ‘down-going’ is death: the dead are placed in a hole in the ground, decompose and become part of the ground. Tyler’s insistence on the acceptance of death often involves references to the ground. While the space monkeys are gardening, Tyler announces in a military drill sergeant style: “You are not special. You
are not a beautiful or unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everything else … we are all part of the same compost heap”, the location of decomposition and death. He also refers to them as maggots. Tyler is forcing them to see themselves as nothing more than organic matter, as they physically work the soil and in the process become dirty with it, embracing it and with it their own imminent death. The fighters in Fight Club being dirty will be addressed later when looking at colour in the film.

However, this desire to embrace the soil seems contrary to Tyler’s job making soap. Why would someone who constantly preaches the necessity of getting dirty, make soap? The answer lies in the way Tyler often appears to be doing something, while in actual fact he doing something subversive at the same time. For instance, while on the surface he is a waiter, underneath he is ‘the guerrilla terrorist of the service food industry,’ peeing in the soup; while he is a projectionist, he is splicing pornography into family films. These jobs afford him “other opportunities.” While on the surface he is making soap, he is also selling “rich women their own fat asses back to them.” This obviously also makes him some money, since he sells it for ‘twenty bucks a bar’ which he can then use for other ventures. The process of making soap is also described as being the first step to making dynamite, and as Tyler says, “With enough soap one could blow up just about anything.” To the outside world, soap cleanses and is the ‘yardstick of civilisation.’ To Tyler it is something that can be used to disrupt civilisation and maybe bring it crashing down. Tyler and the narrator also never look particularly clean themselves, even though they are shown bathing using the bathroom, which is itself very dirty. Some critics have also noted a link between Tyler and the Nazi’s making soap from
human fat (Taubin, 1999: 11; Schwarzbaum, 1999; Diken & Laustsen, 2001: 8). This obviously links Tyler to fascism. This begins to show the often contradictory way that Tyler functions, constantly undermining and disguising his apparent intentions.

The narrative can therefore be read as depicting Tyler as The Superman. He has appeared out of the clouds and is presented as enlightened. Because of Tyler’s teachings, the narrator has moved closer to enlightenment. He has willingly put himself to death, in a sense returning to the ground, by shooting himself in the head to get rid of Tyler. The sentiment of self-actualisation is common in the works of Nietzsche and phrased more concisely in his other works. In *The Gay Science*, he writes, “What do you believe in? - In this: that the weight of all things must be determined anew. What does your conscience say? - ‘You should become him who you are’” (1974: 269-70) or put differently: “Active, successful natures act, not according to the dictum ‘know thyself’, but as if there hovered before them the commandment: will a self and thou shalt become a self” (Nietzsche, 1977: 210). These references to starting anew as a new self, as becoming an enlightened self, can only occur once the teacher is dead and the pupil has ‘hit bottom’ and seen things anew. The narrator says before he is finally able to dispense with Tyler, “My eyes are open.” However, a moment before that he is wondering how hygienic the gun is, which obviously contradicts Tyler’s teaching about ‘down-going,’ making the audience question how much of Tyler’s teaching he has actually internalised.

However, in other ways Tyler cannot really be viewed as The Superman. Tyler is not real and merely the illusion of The Superman that allows the narrator to cross over the rope bridge to the other side of the abyss. The Superman would be the narrator on the other side. As Fincher says:
And that's the conflict at the end - you have Tyler Durden, who is everything you would want to be, except real and empathetic. He's not living in our world, he's not governed by the same forces, he is an ideal. And he can deal with the concepts of our lives in an idealistic fashion, but it doesn’t have anything to do with the compromises of real life as modern man knows it. (Smith, 1999: 65)

As Fincher states, “Nietzsche’s really great with college freshman males, and unfortunately doesn’t have much to say to somebody in their early thirties or early forties” (Fincher in Smith, 1999: 65). He functions as an ideal, as a teacher, to a point, but is not applicable to a life with responsibilities. This is what the narrator realises by the end of the narrative, Tyler has been useful in helping to reach the place he is then in, but he cannot follow Tyler’s anarchic and anti-social lead any longer because a person cannot live that way in reality. Tyler can because he is not real; he is merely the narrator’s projection.

Nietzsche is also relevant to a study of postmodernism. Mary Litch makes this connection in describing the way that Nietzsche wanted to jar his readers into seeing that many of the things they currently believed were not objectively true, without thereby putting something equally untrue in their place. The use of multiple perspectives, in both film and literature, serves a similar purpose. We as viewers, are shown several incompatible descriptions of the world and asked not to pick which one is the objectively correct one (2002: 52)

Tyler and Nietzsche are filled with contradictions and ambiguities because of this unwillingness to become just another ‘grand narrative,’ that very evil they are attempting to discredit. By the end of the film, Tyler still needs to be destroyed because his very existence represents the possibility of future narratives to the narrator and Tyler becomes a God-like figure. However, as has been stated, Tyler is not real, he is actually an aspect
of the narrator, the narrator's latent desires that come to the surface and to some degree need to be silenced. To understand this aspect of the teacher, we need to understand Tyler as 'shadow.'
Tyler as Jungian Shadow

_The film Fight Club explores the idea of the alter-ego. ... It could be seen as expressing the collective unconscious._

- Michael O'Shaughnessy & Jane Stadler

It is now necessary to look at exactly how Tyler functions as the narrator’s projection or shadow self. As Patrick Feury writes, *Fight Club*’s narrator suffers from _dementia praecox_ (2004: 22), more commonly known as schizophrenia. As a result, he suffers from hallucinations, of which Tyler is an example. The clearest description of how this hallucination has come about happens after the car crash and the narrator has flown around trying to find Tyler. The narrator finally succeeds with the help of a phone call to Marla that breaks the only promise he ever made to Tyler. This act of rebellion brings Tyler back, sitting across from the narrator in his hotel room with a now shaved head and dressed at arguably his most outlandish, with Oakley Mars sunglasses, a loosely knitted vest he could even have knitted himself and a thick fur coat (Figure 18). It is as if he has returned from the land of kudzu vines and venison he describes to the narrator before he leaves. In this moment, the narrator is literally confronted by Tyler as ‘pure id’ (Taubin, 1999: 16), as the fully-fledged doppelganger or shadow in a Jungian sense sitting across from him forcing the narrator to account for this aspect of himself.
As they sit opposite each other, Tyler explains: "You were looking for a way to change your life. You could not do this on your own. All the ways you wished you could be, that's me! I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck. I'm smart, capable and most importantly, I'm free in all the ways that you are not." The two parts of the narrator's character, his light and dark side, have gone out of balance to the point where these two sides have become so distinct they are now in direct conflict with each other. The narrator has become estranged from this side of himself. Luke Hockley accounts for this process in psychoanalysis: "The degree to which one is distanced from this path to self-actualisation is termed 'incongruence' or alienation" (2001: 18). The further the narrator has gone off his path to maturity and enlightenment, the more apparent his shadow has become and the more alien it appears.

As the narrator slowly realises what has happened, we begin to see Tyler as he actually is: the narrator's Jungian shadow self. The *Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis* defines the shadow as "the negative side of the personality, the sum of all the unpleasant qualities one wants to hide, the inferior, worthless and primitive side of man's
Other times you imagine yourself watching me.

... Little by little you're just letting yourself become Tyler Durden!

It is also important to note the way Jung links the appearance of archetypes, of which the shadow is an example (Hockley, 2001: 32), with the spiritual wellbeing of the subject. Contact with an archetype should be seen as just as spiritual or ‘numinous’ an experience as contact with God, because Jung sees God as an archetype. Hockley writes:

More literally, numinosity is a spiritual or transcendent experience. Jung postulated that somehow it is possible to get a ‘religious’ experience by being in contact with the unconscious, or as Jung would more cautiously postulate, the experience would be one of the image of God. (2001: 32)

Therefore, Tyler forms a contact with the spiritual realm in much the same way as contact with God is viewed. With God absent in his life, Tyler can be seen as taking God’s place.

What exactly does Tyler teach though? A close look at how he teaches Raymond K. Hessel makes for a simple entry point into his method. Tyler starts off his lesson with, “Raymond, you are going to die”, and Raymond pleads for his life. Tyler then threatens to shoot him and finds out that Raymond intended and started studying towards becoming a veterinarian. After Raymond says it required too much schooling, Tyler says, “Would you rather be dead? Would you rather die? Here, on your knees, in the back of a convenience store? ... I'm going to check on you. I know where you live. If you’re not on your way to becoming a veterinarian in six weeks, you will be dead.” At this point the narrator still does not understand Tyler’s method and is disgusted by his actions, saying, “I feel ill.” Tyler then turns this around to make his motives clear, saying, “Imagine how he feels.” The narrator, thinking it was all some kind of sick joke, retorts with, “Come on,
This isn't funny! That wasn't funny! What the fuck was the point of that?” Tyler then makes it all clear by stating, “Tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of Raymond K. Hessel’s life. His breakfast will taste better than any meal you and I have ever tasted” and the retrospective narrator’s voiceover acknowledges, “You had to give it to him … He had a plan. And it started to make sense in a Tyler sort of way. No fear. No distractions. … The ability to let that which does not matter truly slide.”

Tyler’s intentions, simplified here in only a short encounter with someone requiring enlightenment, become clear. What Tyler has managed to do is make Raymond acknowledge that his life is short, that he may die at any time and that this means that he needs to go out and get what he wants from life without hesitation. He needs to ‘get his hands dirty’ and work for what he wants without merely slipping into the easy position of a shopkeeper which the capitalist culture has provided for him. The narrator’s reference to ‘no fear’ and ‘no distractions’ alludes to a life led to the full and in the moment, a life that lets “that which does not matter truly slide” without trepidation or regret. Tyler then compounds this lesson by addressing the audience directly, stating: “You are not your job. You’re not how much money you have in the bank. You’re not the car you drive. You’re not the contents of your wallet. You’re not your fucking khakis. You are the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world.” This allows the message to become a general one, one that we the audience can adapt from Raymond and his circumstances to our own lives and ends with another reference to the earthly, calling us the ‘crap of the world.’

Another point where Tyler’s teachings are made explicitly clear is in the car crash sequence. After the narrator turns into ‘psycho boy’ and disfigures Angel Face, the narrator and Tyler leave and get into a car. The narrator feels left out and confronts Tyler
about Project Mayhem. However, Tyler uses this opportunity to further illustrate how he needs to let go and how he needs to focus on what he wants to get from life:

NARRATOR
I want to know what you're thinking.

TYLER
Fuck what you know. You need to forget about what you know, that's your problem. Forget about what you think you know - about life, about friendship, and especially about you and me.

NARRATOR
Wh--What is that supposed to mean? Wh--? What are you doing?

TYLER
(To the space monkeys in the back seat) Guys, what would you wish you'd done before you die?

STEPH
Paint a self-portrait.

MECHANIC
Build a house.

TYLER
(To narrator) And you?

NARRATOR
I don't know. Nothing, nothing. Come on, get in the right lane, turn the wheel now, come on!

TYLER
You have to know the answer to this question. If you were to die right now, how would you feel about your life?

NARRATOR
I don't know, I wouldn't feel anything good about my life, is that what you want to hear me say? Fine. Come on!

TYLER
Not good enough.
The space monkeys’ ability to immediately answer Tyler’s question shows how they have acknowledged that they could die at any minute and that they have clear personal goals to achieve before they do so. This is meant to inspire the narrator to do the same, but he is not able to do so. However, looking closely at the space monkeys’ answers makes their answers less convincing. The two do not appear to be making any attempt to achieve their goals while in Project Mayhem; there is definitely no house building or painting happening in the Paper Street house. Again Tyler’s messages are being subverted.

As their car narrowly misses another, the narrator is still trying to gain control of the situation, instead of letting ‘it slide,’ which is what Tyler wants to teach him to do:

NARRATOR
Quit screwing around, take the wheel.

TYLER
Look at you! Look at you! You're a fucking pathetic.

NARRATOR
Why? Why? What are you talking about?

TYLER
Why do you think I blew up your condo?

NARRATOR
What?

TYLER
Hitting bottom isn’t a weekend-retreat; it’s not a goddamn seminar. Stop trying to control everything and just let go. Let go!

NARRATOR
Alright, fine!

As the narrator finally lets go of the situation, signified by his letting go of the steering wheel that he has frantically grabbed, the passengers buckle up and prepare for the
inevitable crash. They then crash violently into a stationary car. This incident is meant to
represent the narrator's life and how he should approach it. The crash is inevitable, the
way certain aspects of life, like death, are. With Tyler's help, the narrator is able to let go
of the situation and accept the inevitable. Having accepted that he cannot and should not
attempt to control his life, the narrator is able to go through a new experience that
broadens his understanding, one that Tyler says takes him closer to really experiencing
life, through this 'near-life experience':

NARRATOR (V.O.)
I'd never been in a car accident. This must've been what all those people
felt like before I filed them as statistics in my reports.

TYLER
Goddamn! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! We just had a near-life experience!

A 'near-death experience' has become a 'near-life experience' for the narrator as he has
been forced to accept his death and in so doing appreciated his life.

The healing of the split or imbalance between the narrator (Jung's 'personality
one') and Tyler (Jung's 'personality two' or shadow), comes about due to what Jung calls
the 'individuation process.' He describes it as: "an identification with the totality of the
personality, with the self" (Jung, 1977: 123). The Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis
describes it more plainly as: "A person's becoming himself, whole, indivisible and
distinct from other people or collective psychology (though also in relation to these)"
(1986: 76). This process means a coming to peace with the entirety of the self that has
become split due to forces either external or internal. The person must "become
conscious in what respects he or she is both a unique human being and, at the same time,
no more than a common man or woman" (1986: 76). It has taken Tyler's "You are not a
beautiful or unique snowflake” to balance the narrator out into a position where he understands that he is something between the ‘the crap of the world’ and a ‘unique snowflake.’ What this means for the narrator is that he must balance the Tyler side of himself with the part that has been the narrator to this point, that he is able to be true to his natural desires while at the same time being an acceptable member of the civilised human race.

The last scene of the film, which shows the narrator confronting Tyler, marks the moment where each ‘personality’ has gone as far as it can go with the other still being in existence. They have reached an impasse. Tyler is so destructive that the narrator cannot follow him any longer; the pupil is no longer able to follow the teacher. While on the other hand the narrator is being withheld from the path he is now actively and positively choosing by the Tyler side that wants to blow everything up and potentially kill Marla. This accounts for the way the narrator has apparently reached a point of enlightenment at the end of the narrative, standing hand in hand with Marla, having balanced the initial narrator side of himself with the Tyler aspect of himself.
Marxist Undertones

*It is perhaps more adequate to label it [Fight Club] “marxism for dummies.”*

- B. Diken & C.B. Laustsen

With labels such as ‘fascist’ being bandied around by critics, it is necessary to examine Tyler’s political agenda. It is abundantly clear that the political foe in the film is capitalism. However, the attack on capitalism is not a nuanced or comprehensive one. As Henry Giroux writes:

> But the truth is that *Fight Club* has nothing to say about the structural violence of unemployment, job security, cuts in public spending, and the destruction of institutions capable of defending social provisions and the public good. On the contrary, *Fight Club* defines the violence of capitalism almost exclusively in terms of an attack on traditional (if not to say regressive) notions of masculinity, and in doing so reinscribes white heterosexuality within a dominant logic of stylised brutality and male bonding that appears predicated on the need to denigrate and wage war against the feminine. In this instance, the crisis of capitalism is reduced to the crisis of masculinity, and the crisis lies less in the economic, political, and social conditions of capitalism itself than in the rise of a culture of consumption in which men are allegedly domesticated, rendered passive, soft, and emasculated. (2002: 259-60)

While Marxism is felt in the film, rather than directly referenced, this can be seen as a common trend in a film that describes ideologies without directly prescribing them. The traces are, however, abundantly evident and need to be isolated if the political aspects of the film are to be understood at all, and if claims like Giroux’s concerns surrounding the reduction of politics to gender are to be explored adequately.

The shift from a manufacturing base to an information-based economy can clearly be felt in *Fight Club*. As has been stated previously, the narrator has begun to see lives as statistics; he ‘crunches’ numbers in his cubicled office and then goes home to his ‘filing
cabinet.’ The one place he does actually interact with people and feel accepted is in the support groups he attends, but they accept him under a false pretence, he portrays a façade that they accept. He feels completely alienated from his work, other people and apparently also himself, not even having a real identity.

Giroux continues to develop his concerns relating to the way *Fight Club* blends politics and gender by stating:

> [A]s white, heterosexual, working-class and middle-class men face a life of increasing uncertainty and insecurity, they no longer have easy access to those communities in which they can inhabit a form of masculinity that defines itself in opposition to femininity. In simple terms, the new millennium offers white heterosexual men nothing less than a life in which ennui and domestication define their everyday existence. (2002: 262-3)

This describes a breakdown of a sense of self through a change in the basis of the economy. These themes are obviously most easily linked to Marxist theory of the economy dictating consciousness (Marx, 1970: 21).

So, in general terms, Marxism is particularly useful in the analysis of civilisation gone wrong. As Terry Eagleton writes:

> Marxism is the scientific theory of human societies and of the practice of transforming them; and what that means, rather more concretely, is that the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression. (1976: vii)

Looking at the two quotes together, Giroux would highlight the film as depicting the struggles of men ‘to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression,’ and that in the film, this attempt is incorrectly aimed at women, instead of actual capitalism.
The link between *Fight Club* and Marxist theory is most evident through Tyler’s pronouncements that have thus far been linked to Nietzsche. For instance Tyler’s “The things you own end up owning you” echoes Marx in the *Paris Notebooks*: “The more the world of things increases in value, the more in direct proportion the world of men loses value” (1994: 71) and “the worker becomes enslaved to his object [capital]” (1994: 72). Tyler’s, “We reject the basic assumption of civilization, especially the importance of material possessions” echoes Marx’s, “Private property has made us stupid and narrow minded” (1994: 82). Tyler’s “It’s only after we’ve lost everything that we are free to do anything” reflects Marx’s “The positive superseding of private property [Communism] as the appropriating of human life is therefore the positive superseding of all estrangement and thus man’s return from religion, family, state, etc. to his human, i.e. social existence” (1994: 80) (author’s emphasis). Tyler’s speech that starts with “You are not your job. You’re not how much money you have in the bank…” is also similar to Marx’s statement that, “under private property [labour] is alienation of life, for labour is in order to live, in order to provide a means for life. My labour is not life” (1994: 96) (author’s emphasis). This also mirror’s Lester Burnham’s statement about things like the sofa becoming more important than life in *American Beauty*.

The main reason for the alienation of Marx’s labourer is the advent of mechanisation estranging him from his labour; capital had replaced the finished article as the fruition of the labourer’s toil. Marx writes in *The Communist Manifesto*:

Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him. (2002: 227)
Marx’s labourer’s work comes to mean nothing to him, in the same way that the narrator’s labour means nothing to the narrator. The narrator is merely an office worker, a drone like many others (Figure 14), who drinks coffee, makes photocopies and feeds numbers into his computer, having no contact with any physical product, other than the ‘capital’ he earns and spends on articles he hopes will ‘define him as a person’ without satisfaction. As his Tyler persona verbalises: “Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don’t need.”

_Fight Club_ has also been described as directly attacking capitalism through certain capitalist signifiers, particularly the targets of Project Mayhem, such as the computer shop, the BMW dealership and the franchise coffee bar. The target that receives the most attention, however, is the attack on the new VW Beetle. Edward Norton explains that he and Brad Pitt asked the film executives to add the Beetle to the list of luxury cars such as the BMW and Range Rover they were supposed to smash ( _Fight Club_ DVD Commentary, 01:18:06). Norton describes how they saw the VW bug as a complete sell-out by the baby boomers of the sixties, who later became business executives, attempting to repackage the ‘democratic’ people’s car and sell it to the next generation who they completely do not understand, in effect, making money off of their own liberating revolution.

Along with other references, this inclusion clearly draws a line between the rich and powerful and the working-class everyman who needs liberation from the exploitation and alienation he feels as a result of capitalism. In effect, this appears to be recreating Marx’s division between the “two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly
facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat” (2002: 220). However, there is a problem here and it becomes apparent when Tyler states: “Godammit, an entire generation pumping gas and waiting tables. Slaves in white collars.” The narrator is in fact a white-collar worker, someone who would find himself on the Bourgeoisie side of Marx’s line. He is definitely not a blue-collar worker on the assembly line of the car factory, pumping gas or waiting tables; he is the office worker essentially controlling (or at least having a hand in the control of) the means of production creating the cars.

Emphasising the need for a new category to describe the narrator and his fellow Fight Club members, Adrienne Redd proposes that they rather be referred to as ‘gray-collar workers’:

*Fight Club* is also about masculinity, but with the crucial proviso that it is about masculinity among a specific class of American men: the burgeoning stratum of service or gray-collar workers. There was a time when blue-collar workers could invest in a kind of honor and mythology of hard physical work, but “the world has changed” (as one Bruce Springsteen song laments) and now former steelworkers are parking cars, waiting tables, and watching security monitors. They have not even the solace of big muscles and the solidarity of unions from which to construct their identities and with which to salve their bruised egos. (2004)

This also leaves them without the solace of a clearly defined class struggle. Giroux believes this is because the narrator represents “the crisis of capitalism repackaged as the crisis of domesticated masculinity” (2002: 268), while “class as a critical category is non-existent in the film” (2002: 269). Diken & Laustsen reiterate this point by stating:

*Fight Club* exempts itself from the concrete historical context and from an actual involvement with politics. Rather than a political act, *Fight Club* thus seems to be a trancelike subjective experience, a kind of pseudo-Bakhtinan carnivalesque activity in which the rhythm of everyday life is only temporarily suspended. (2001:12).
Each struggle is depicted as a personal struggle, rather than a group one. It is almost as if the film could also have followed men like the narrator’s boss as they battle with the same alienating circumstances. As Giroux states: “Choice for Tyler appears to be an exclusively individual act, a simple matter of personal will that functions outside of existing relations of power, resources, and social formations” (2002: 269). This is an individual undertaking, an individual path. Tyler finishes his ‘slaves in white collars’ speech with references to ‘no Great War’ and ‘no Great Depression’ - these were objective circumstances that could be addressed by the masses, by groups of people uniting. Tyler’s spiritual war is distinctly subjective; the Depression becomes personal depression, the Great War effectively becomes a personal vendetta waged by the narrator but experienced differently by the other men. As a result, the narrator and the men of Fight Club are left fighting themselves and each other under the vague direction of Tyler, not fighting the outside world and definitely not the system or state in any productive way. When they do focus their energies as a collective it results in little more than public mischief under the auspices of Project Mayhem. Their actions never cross over into a revolution because they are not able to clearly identify a target since they are implicated in the problem; their war is actually against themselves. With all the members blindly following Tyler, theirs is no longer a productive collective undertaking. As Giroux points out, “Politics for Tyler is about doing, not thinking” (2002: 268) which leaves the group generally aimless since Tyler’s teachings are essentially intended for the narrator.

As Giroux rightly states, *Fight Club* clearly does repackage an apparently political agenda as a gender crisis, as a crisis of masculinity where men have no cause to fight for. The enemy is a dull job and a threatening woman, not the state. Political agency and
class-consciousness are erased while context and theory appear irrelevant. However, as Geoffrey Sirc writes, “To demand a better, more politically rigorous *Fight Club*, one that, as Henry Giroux suggests, says something about unemployment, spending cuts, and corporate lay-offs – I can’t fathom who would pay money for a feel bad lesson like that” (2001: 425). The type of film Giroux is calling for, politically, does not appear to be possible while at the same time reaching the large audience and creating the type of provocation and exhilaration the film has achieved. These types of results are only possible through the type of anarchic and haphazard politics the film employs.
Anarchist Overtones

So, in some respects, it's a hymn of praise to anarchy and chaos.

- Stephen Hunter

*Fight Club* becomes more directly political with Tyler's creation of Project Mayhem (or 'Operation Mayhem,' as Giroux calls it). As Tyler states in the car, "Fight Club was the beginning. Now it's moved out of the basement and it's called Project Mayhem" and *Fight Club*, the gang, becomes Project Mayhem, the army (Diken & Laustsen, 2001:6).

When *Fight Club* comes to the surface it begins to affect more than just the private lives of its members, it begins to directly affect society with its 'political' agenda. However, this also marks the point where Tyler and the narrator's ideologies begin to diverge. The narrator is generally in the dark about Tyler's movements and intentions, but thus far he has always approved of them once he realises what is going on. This can be seen clearly in the scene with Raymond K. Hessel. Tyler acts of his own accord, drastically at times, then once he makes his intentions clear or the scene plays out, the narrator accepts being part of it. This is also the case with the beginning of Project Mayhem. When Tyler starts building bunk beds in the basement and interviewing 'applicants,' the narrator goes along stating, "In Tyler we trusted."

However, as some critics have observed, the actions of Project Mayhem are in actual fact without any real political agenda. Nelmes writes, "The paramilitary group has no real politics" (2003: 274) and Žižek describes how, "instead of concrete political practice, we get an aestheticist explosion of violence" (2003: 121). To understand this
non-political and aesthetic movement, we need to look at how exactly Project Mayhem functions.

Project Mayhem starts innocuously enough through the homework assignment that instructs the members to start a fight outside of the basement and lose. It also has direct bearing on the fight that had just happened, a re-enactment of the fight between Tyler and Lou. From then on the homework assignments have nothing to do with fighting and only involve acts of public mischief. They begin to live together in the house and are instructed to come dressed in black, the colour associated with the anarchist movement and its plain black flag.

As Giroux states, this movement out of the basement signifies the members’ ability to move beyond addressing their own internal demons, to addressing their external conditions as well:

In other words, the only way Tyler’s followers can become agents in a society that has deadened them is to get in touch with the primal instincts for competition and violence, and the only way their masculine identity can be reclaimed is through the literal destruction of their present selves – beating each other senseless – and their only recourse to community is to collectively engage in acts of militia-inspired terrorism aimed at corporate strongholds. (2002: 266)

The narrator is comfortable with the internal confrontation, but becomes uncomfortable when it becomes external. These acts start becoming dangerous and the narrator voices his disapproval. Giroux states:

Eventually Jack has second thoughts about his homoerotic attraction to Tyler as a self-styled antihero when Tyler’s narcissism and bravado mutates into an unbridled megalomania that appears more psychotic than anarchistic … And Tyler ups the stakes of Fight Club by turning it into Operation Mayhem, a nationwide organization of terrorist thugs whose aim is to wage war against the rich and powerful. (2002: 266)
'Psychotic' may be a rather extreme term to label the actions of Project Mayhem, but they can safely be called 'anarchic.' Giroux then goes on to account for these actions:

The acts of "resistance" carried out by Operation Mayhem, range from what has been described as "culture jamming" (transforming advertising billboards into political slogans, replacing airline safety cards with ones whose images depict the real outcome of a plane crash) to various forms of petty vandalism (demagnetizing an entire storeworth of video rentals, encouraging pigeons to shit all over a BMW dealership) to outright anarchic violence against what Tyler sees as the central symbols of domesticated masculinity: computers, the chief agents behind the end of industrialisation; yuppie coffee bars, taken as symptomatic of the fetishization and feminization of a drink once associated with labor; and credit-card companies, whose products lie at the very centre of contemporary consumer culture. (Giroux, 2002: 266-7)

These acts of 'anarchic violence' fall safely within the realm of an anarchic sensibility, however, strictly speaking, anarchism need not involve violence at all.

Describing the association of anarchism with violence, Kropotkin cites the retaliation for the persecution of strikers in 1887 as the source:

This created in the general public the impression that violence is the substance of anarchism, a view repudiated by its supporters, who hold that in reality violence is resorted to by all parties in proportion as their open action is obstructed by repression, and exceptional laws render them outlaws. (1995: 243).

The narrator also feels that the later acts of violence, including the masked bombings, are going too far. His fears about the danger involved in these acts are realised when Bob is shot and killed. This clearly affects the narrator as he has a particularly close bond with Bob, much closer than with any of the other members. The narrator is also directly responsible for Bob being a part of Project Mayhem since Bob was about to walk away, when initially rejected by Tyler, when the narrator helped him to get accepted.
At this point it is necessary to look at what exactly is meant by terms like ‘anarchy’ and ‘anarchism.’ Without addressing the issue in its exhaustive entirety, a basic definition will suffice:

Historically, anarchism is a doctrine which poses a criticism of existing society; a view of a desirable future society; and a means of passing from one to the other. … Anarchism, historically speaking, is concerned mainly with man in his relation to society. Its ultimate aim is always social change; its present attitude is always one of social condemnation, even though it may proceed from an individualist view of man’s nature; its method is always that of social rebellion, violent or otherwise. (Woodcock, 1975: 7)

Most useful here is the description of the desire for social change, using violent or non-violent means. This attitude is present in Tyler’s teachings and in his, and Project Mayhem’s, actions. To achieve the desired change, attention is directed towards that which keeps the unfavourable state in place, those authorities or institutions that are seen as keeping man from a more desirable state. In the film these are identified as the police and the Police Chief, credit card companies and status symbols characteristic of the capitalist state. This ‘libertarian attitude’ is characterised by its “rejection of dogma, its deliberate avoidance of rigidly systematic theory, and, above all, its stress on extreme freedom of choice and on the primacy of the individual judgement” (Woodcock, 1975: 15).

Woodcock continues to describe anarchism as a “natural law of balance operating within society [that] rejects authority as an enemy and not as a friend of order” (1975: 10) and how “the anarchist believes in a moral urge powerful enough to survive the destruction of authority and still to hold society together in the free and natural bonds of fraternity” (1975: 12). Without clear class distinctions and a more individualist approach,
the film appears to be aligning itself more successfully with an anarchist mindset than a Marxist one. However, in applying this ‘doctrine’ to *Fight Club*, the issue of leadership becomes a problem. Tyler, who also leads Project Mayhem, and Fight Club before it, is clearly leading the narrator. Even if one accepts that the former is not a problem since the narrator and Tyler are the same person, the latter still exists as a leader. As Woodcock states, this problem often occurs in anarchism:

In practice, of course, anarchist militants have often come dangerously near to the authoritarian stance of the revolutionary leader, but their basic theory has always rejected any such position, and has sought to eliminate its necessity by posing the idea of the spontaneous origin of revolutions. (1975: 16)

He then states that “freedom of interpretation and variety of approach are elements one would naturally expect to find in the world of the anarchist … an urge unhindered by the power of personal leaders or sacred texts” (1975: 16) which are problematised through the presence of Tyler and perhaps even his list of rules. As Gary Crowdus describes, this leadership also has a negative effect on the members: “As Tyler proselytizes his troops through a bullhorn, it’s clear that they have become as manipulated and dehumanized by their leader as they ever were by the corporate civilization from which he is trying to rescue them” (2000: 48).

In one respect, the film tries to overcome this in the way that Tyler does not exist, even though some members have met him, the later dominant side of their body is controlled by the narrator. Psychologically, Tyler does not exist so once the narrator stops acting as Tyler, he is no longer really their leader. In another respect, it is important to note how Tyler sets the ‘organisation’ up. The creation of rules such as “The first rule of Project Mayhem is that you do not ask questions” means that once Tyler disappears, his
doctrine will be followed no matter who tries to stop it. However, this can still be seen as leadership or a ‘sacred text’ of sorts. The narrator describes this when he tries to get himself arrested, saying:

I am the leader of a terrorist organization responsible for numerous acts of vandalism and assault all over this city ... Chapters have sprung up in five or six other major cities already. This is a tightly regimented organization with many cells capable of operating completely independent of central leadership.

These cells ‘operating completely independent of central leadership’ are also reminiscent of the Fight Clubs that sprang up without the narrator or Tyler starting them. The assumption here is that Tyler has managed to tap into a ‘natural law of balance,’ a ‘moral urge’ powerful enough to drive its members forward long after he has gone.

Before he leaves, however, Tyler imparts his full vision to the narrator as the narrator passes in and out of consciousness after the car crash:

In the world I see you’re stalking elk through the Grand Canyon forests around the ruins of the Rockefeller Centre. You’ll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life. You’ll climb the thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. And when you look down you’ll see tiny figures pounding corn, laying strips of venison in the empty carpool lane of some abandoned superhighway.

This paints Tyler as a specific kind of anarchist, an anarcho-primitivist. Tyler wishes for more than just the destruction of credit records, he wants humankind to return to a state of the hunter/gatherer by destroying modern civilisation. Anarcho-primitivism is described as “a radical current that critiques the totality of civilisation from an anarchist perspective, and seeks to initiate a comprehensive transformation of human life” (Moore, 1997). Anarcho-primitivists also take particular note of the negative effects of technology:
Simultaneously, we examine the evolution of Power in our midst in order to suggest new terrains for contestations and critique in order to undermine the present tyranny of the modern totalitarian discourse - that hyper-reality that destroys human meaning, and hence solidarity, by simulating it with technology. Underlying all struggles for freedom is this central necessity: to regain a truly human discourse grounded in autonomous, intersubjective mutuality and closely associated with the natural world” (Moore, 1997).

The most famous anarcho-primitivist would have to be the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, which noticeably displays where this line of thinking can lead.

However, as Hobsbawm illustrates, “the main appeal of anarchism was emotional and not intellectual. … The very extremism of the anarchist rejection of state and organisation, the totality of their commitment to the overthrow of the present society, could not but arouse admiration” (1977: 83). This creates a vogue, which is particularly attractive to “students and intellectuals, at a time when objective historical factors in the developed countries do not make revolution appear very probable” (1977: 84). The reference to ‘students’ also links back to Fincher’s statement about Nietzsche being so appealing to men in their twenties, but not much beyond that. Both groups can be seen as being able to accommodate radical thinking that eventually dissipates when confronted by ‘the real world.’ This can be seen in the narrator’s later disavowal of the anarchist cause set up by Tyler. This also displays the way the film posits the idea of anarchism as attractive and necessary, while later disavowing it and undermining it as extremist. It is therefore clear that, as Geoffrey Sirc states, “Fight Club will not be resolved by a tidy political analysis” (2001: 428).
Chapter Four: The Appearance

Having reached an understanding of the way Tyler’s advocates anarchist theory, it is now necessary to look at what the film promotes through its visual appearance. Is it merely descriptive or is it prescriptive to some extent as well? If so, what is the message it has to teach and how does it go about imparting this message visually? The film’s aesthetic needs to be investigated to see how it impacts, reiterates or contradicts the aspects analysed thus far in relation to the film’s narrator, its other characters as well as Tyler’s teachings. To understand this aspect of the film one needs to look at the visual aspects of the film, to see how the film functions in a way that is particular to the medium.
nature, the ‘other person’ in one, one’s own dark side” (Samuels, 1986: 138). In ‘Lecture 1’ of the ‘Tavistock Lectures’, Jung describes four phases of ‘endopsychic’ engagement, in effect, engagement with the ‘shadow-world’ (1977: 21). He describes how it is that we are constantly learning new things about ourselves, which “shows [that] there is always a part of our personality which is still unconscious, which is still becoming: we are unfinished; we are growing and changing. Yet that future personality which we are to be in a year’s time is already here, only it is in the shadow” (1977: 22).

The first phase is memory; it “links us up with things that became subliminal or were cast away or repressed” (Jung, 1977: 22). The second phase is the ‘subjective component of conscious functions’ (1977: 21), which include dark thoughts or “subjective reactions which are more or less inadmissible or unjust or inaccurate” (1977: 22). The third phase is when one is affected or emotional, “you are moved away, you are cast out, your decent ego is put aside, and something else takes your place” (1977: 23). He even uses the exact phrase: “He is beside himself” (1977: 24). The fourth phase involves complete ‘invasion’: “Here the shadow side, the unconscious side, has full control so that it can break into the conscious condition” (1977: 24). This is what happens when Tyler springs forth. However, this is a lot for the narrator to comprehend and he naturally balks at the idea, saying:

NARRATOR
This is crazy.

TYLER
People do it every day. They talk to themselves. They see themselves as they like to be. They don’t have the courage you have, to just run with it.
...
Naturally you’re still wrestling with it; so sometimes you’re still you.
...
An Anarchist Aesthetic

Fight Club is packaged to make us drool. After watching it, we want to buy the theatre, not burn it down.

- Sean Lindsay

Richard Porton closes his comprehensive chapter on ‘The Elusive Anarchist Aesthetic,’ with the statement that “Critics are rarely soothsayers, but it seems safe to say that the future will bring novel permutations of the ever evolving anarchist aesthetic” (1999: 253). After looking at traces of anarchism through its many guises, incorporating surrealist, situationist and realist representations, and linking them back to influential anarchist thought, he leaves the future open to its own expressions, predicting its continued elusiveness and reoccurrence.

While Porton’s approach leaves the future open in this regard, he does leave the reader with a quote by Richard Kostelanetz that is particularly useful in discerning an anarchist aesthetic in its many guises: “[I]f a work of art is to be truly anarchist, its means corresponding to its ends, it must be anarchist in its plot, anarchist in its images, or anarchist in its form” (1999: 253). The anarchist plot has already been accounted for in the last section, but the concepts of an ‘anarchist image’ and an ‘anarchist form’ still need to be investigated. These will be explored as ‘anarchist moment.’

Expanding the term of an ‘anarchist aesthetic’ to the more general, revolutionary aesthetic, this study can also make use of the work done by Colin MacCabe in his work on Brecht, realism and cinema where he describes how revolutionary art needs to be revolutionary in form as well as content (1985: 55) while anything less should rather be termed ‘progressive’ or ‘subversive’ rather than ‘revolutionary’ (1985: 55). An
investigation of the film’s ‘anarchist moments’ will allow for an understanding of whether the film can justifiably be referred to as having an ‘anarchist aesthetic,’ or whether it merely has a ‘progressive’ or ‘revolutionary’ one.

In his study of the anarchist aesthetic, Porton traces a line “from the belief in poet-seers (which is still apparent in some commercial and art films) to less narcissistic critiques of the media” (1999: 247). This statement, in conjunction with his chapter as a whole, makes the distinction between the filmmaker as prophet and the work as containing subversive and antiauthoritarian impulses and moments that are very conscious of their medium and often self-reflexively anarchist. So the image, or the form for that matter, can be seen as an anarchist one if it disrupts a depicted authority in the form of its plot, or it can disrupt the medium, which can either be seen as an authority itself or that which represents authority.

The images that most clearly disrupt the medium and/or the depicted authority include the Tyler ‘pop-ups,’ the projectionist scene (and its concomitant ‘penis splice’ image at the end of the film) and Tyler’s “fucking khakis” direct address. These moments represent a break in the film’s surface and a disruption of the viewing experience as Tyler advances out of the narrative and begins to challenge us, the audience, directly through aesthetic disturbances.

The ‘pop-ups’ are the first of these disturbances to appear and they are the most benign. Tyler is spliced into scenes of the film briefly enough to make him almost invisible on first watching the film. Either he is missed completely - he may be recognised subconsciously but not consciously - or mistaken for a glitch of some sort. His first momentary appearance is in the narrator’s office while the narrator is making
photocopies. This is quite easily cast off because the narrator is talking about his
insomnia and how he sees everything as a copy of a copy. His dazed state could easily
account for images popping in and out of sight. Tyler then pops up in the hospital when
the doctor says “pain”, in the men’s group when the leader is talking about opening up
and when Marla is walking down the street and away from the group. These are
disruptive because the audience (and the narrator) have not been introduced to Tyler yet
since this only happens later on in the plane. Even though this makes sense
psychologically in the narrator’s mind, since he is beginning to need his alter ego, his
appearance visually to the audience disrupts the narrative because they are unaware of his
psychological process. As Tyler surfaces into the narrator’s conscious state he becomes a
stable physical character and we see him moving along the travelator and in the hotel
welcome video, which is an obvious reference to the photo from the Overlook Hotel in
The Shining (1980). He now has a physical ‘life’ of his own and stops being a disruptive
visual presence.

The projectionist scene, with Tyler working in the background and the narrator
talking to the audience, is also disruptive because it exists extrinsically; it confronts the
audience directly and undermines the viewing experience as merely spectacle. This
happens in a number of ways. Firstly, the narrator is shot straight on and in medium
close-up as he directly addresses the audience, explaining aspects of the narrative that he
as a character should not know about yet. Then Tyler points to the ‘cigarette burn,’ which
is not part of the ‘story world.’ This forces the audience to acknowledge the
constructedness of the film they are watching and also disrupts their comfortable
spectator position through the direct address. This section continues through to Tyler’s
other job at the Pressman Hotel where the narrator is suddenly shown sitting at the table, which again disturbs us, as he has no reason to be a guest there. The final part to this aspect is the shot of the penis at the end of the film. This again undermines the distance between the story and the audience, as Tyler could be our projectionist, splicing single frames of pornography into the film we have just been watching.

The third ‘anarchist image’ or ‘moment’ to be looked at is Tyler’s speech to the audience after he confronts Raymond K. Hessel and after the computer store explodes. The camera tracks in towards Tyler as he delivers one of his all too familiar monologues delivered in the basement of Lou’s Tavern. However, the audience suddenly realises that the camera is moving in too close and as we reach Tyler’s face in close-up his gaze stops roaming around and he focuses directly on the audience. As this happens the frame begins to shake and the sprocket holes on the edges of the film become visible and the soundtrack becomes distorted. Tyler has, through his powerful monologue, distorted the physical filmstrip we are watching. As he finishes and moves away, breaking his powerful gaze, everything is corrected and returns to normal. As this happens we realise that this speech is just for the audience, no one else is shown in the shot and the shot does not fit in with the rest of the narrative.

It could be argued that these last two ‘images’ lose their effectiveness when not viewed in a cinema. While this may be true, its transference onto tape or DVD includes its own disruptive ‘images.’ Immediately after the copyright warning and the Universal logo are shown, a false warning, written by Tyler, appears, again referring directly to the audience and questions us about why we are reading the warning and not getting out of our apartments. The green neon ‘smiley face’ also flashes up for a moment, the same one
that was sprayed on the side of the building by Project Mayhem. This clearly shows that the tape or DVD has supposedly also been vandalised by Tyler and his ‘space monkeys.’

The cinema also has its own particular ‘anarchist moments.’ Instead of making standard trailers for the film, Fincher decided to record two public service announcements or PSAs that have now also been released as special features on recent copies of the DVD. The first PSA shows the narrator speaking directly to the audience in his attire from the film with an indistinct background. He recites a standard cinema message about smoking and cell phones in the theatre, and then says: “...and remember, no-one has the right to touch you in your bathing suit area.” As the first contact an audience member will have of the film, this comes as quite a shock. The narrator has moved from a standard rendition of ‘do’s and don’ts’ to mocking this type of warning. He has also said nothing about the film except shown that it is a radical departure from what the audience is used to and that it will contain significant amounts of irony.

The second PSA shows Tyler pointing out exits in case of the “unlikely event of a fire”, also in his attire from the film, when a fade out and a fade in shows him saying the line, “Did you know that urine is sterile? You can drink it.” It fades out again and he can be heard saying, “I don’t know where that came from” as he and others laugh. This safety message also undermines itself and shows the film to be subverting its own message and that the creators are mischievously playing with the medium, happy to leave a character joking about what he just said in the final product. These examples from before the film was even released show the attitude that the film is attempting to portray being a deeply ironic and anarchic attitude to filmmaking, discarding the standard conventions of filmmaking and forcing the audience to think about what they are viewing. As Fincher is
recorded saying about them, “I wanted to set the stage for the idea of disseminating misinformation … and I knew there was gonna be enough misinformation about this movie without any help from me” (Wise, 1999).

In looking at the anarchist form of the film, the first departure from the classic form is the non-linear narrative that occurs due to the bulk of the film actually being a flashback, with the end of the plot being at the beginning of the story. While it is tempting to discard this as a very common device in modern cinema, two aspects make its form stand out. The first is that the initial move back is not fluid. When the narrator decides to take the audience back, to explain his current predicament, he goes back to the men’s group scene with Bob, and then realises that he has to go further back for the narrative to really make sense. His clumsy narration, starting and then starting again, and his inability to tell the story effectively brings him into doubt as a clear-sighted, omniscient narrator.

The second is a comment made by Tyler about the flashback:

TYLER
Three minutes, this is it, the beginning, ground zero.

NARRATOR (V.O.)
I think this is about where we came in

TYLER
Would you like to say any words to mark the occasion?

(Mumbles)

NARRATOR
I’m sorry?

TYLER
I still can’t think of anything.
TYLER

Ah, flashback humour.

Even though we know Tyler and the narrator are the same person by this time, it is still disruptive to hear Tyler, as a character in the film who is not the narrator, make reference to the flashback. By having Tyler refer to the construction of the film form the film is again drawing attention to its construction.

These elements of instability and interaction between the film world and the world of the spectator display an attitude of rebellion against standard conventions and form and allow for a more direct engagement with its messages. An anarchist message, valid or otherwise, is more believable if that message is seen to be at play within an anarchist aesthetic.

Another way that a message in the film is transferred directly to its aesthetic is the way the film stock was treated. Fincher describes how they literally ‘dirtied’ the stock to imprint this part of Tyler’s message onto the stock:

Jeff Cronenweth [Fight Club’s Cinematographer] and I talked about Haskell Wexler’s American Graffiti and how that looked, how the nighttime exteriors have this sort of mundane look, but it still has a lot of different colours but they all seem very true, they don’t seem hyperstylized. And we talked about making a dirty looking movie, kind of grainy. When we processed it, we stretched the contrast to make it kind of ugly, a little bit of underexposure, a little bit of resilvering, and using new high-contrast print stocks and stepping all over it so it has a dirty patina. (Smith, 1999: 65)

*Fight Club* does manage to disturb the surface of the film in some respects. The anarchist aesthetic is incorporated into a standard aesthetic in some ways, an example would be Tyler becoming a stable entity after his pop ups, while others, such as the direct
address and penis splice, are never accounted for within the text. These can justifiably be seen as ‘anarchist moments’ or ‘images.’ The bulk of the film, however, does remain a seamless whole, an easily consumed illusion. While *Fight Club* does manage to reach a certain level of subversion or revolution, it still manages to achieve this within a whole that can be easily consumed, ignoring or forgetting about its moments of aesthetic anarchism. To be truly anarchist it would have to engage more comprehensively with revolutionary techniques, such as those used by filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard. A look at Peter Wollen’s article (2004) on Godard’s films as examples of ‘counter cinema,’ with Wollen’s isolation of techniques such as ‘narrative intransitivity,’ ‘foregrounding,’ ‘multiple diegesis’ and ‘un-pleasure’ reveal a truly revolutionary technique deserving the label of ‘anarchist aesthetic.’
In simple terms, the new millennium offers white heterosexual men nothing less than a life in which ennui and domestication define their everyday existence.

- Henry Giroux

*Fight Club* is dominated by white characters, i.e. Caucasian. The only other races depicted in the film are the black man, who beats the narrator, Raymond K. Hessel, who is Asian, and the occasional black or Asian fighter in the crowd. Project Mayhem is also completely without other races. All the other characters, and particularly the principle characters, are white. This appears to be painting the narrator’s condition as one pertaining particularly to white men, the way it also places itself within a specific economic group.

Whiteness and its associations are investigated in parts of Richard Dyer’s oeuvre of work, particularly his book, *White* (1997) as well as a shorter article, also entitled, *White* (2000). As he discovers, the concept of whiteness is rather elusive, comparable to the concept of masculinity perhaps. This can be seen in the way Dyer describes whiteness:

Trying to think about whiteness in mainstream film is difficult, partly because white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular but also because, when whiteness qua whiteness does come into focus, it is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death. (2000: 733)

Whiteness therefore also maintains its position of power by passing itself off as normal by appearing as ‘nothing,’ the way masculinity has shown itself to do.
Specifically, in relation to the dominance and power of the white male subject, the ‘focus’ is taken off the body and is ‘focused’ on that which is extraneous to the body. Power becomes visible through signifiers like dress, rather than on the body itself. As Dyer states:

Clothes are bearers of prestige, notably of wealth, status and class: to be without them is to lose prestige. Nakedness may also reveal the inadequacies of the body by comparison with social ideals. It may betray the similarity of male and female, white and non-white bodies, undo the remorseless insistences on difference and concomitant power carried by clothes and grooming. The exposed white male body is liable to pose the legitimacy of white male power: why should people who look like that – so unimpressive, so like others – have so much power? (1997: 146)

So the men in Fight Club are being stripped of their signifiers of ‘wealth and prestige,’ an example of this would be the first other man to join the fight being asked to ‘lose the tie’, an obvious class signifier. This describes the ‘stripping down’ of aspects like class to allow the characters to interact with one another on a more basic level, as something closer to equals. This is also shown in the way the narrator’s dress changes through the film. At the beginning of the film the narrator is depicted as smartly dressed in his office environment, with tie and occasional jacket. Later on his dress becomes less formal as he remarks that he no longer wears a tie to work, which coincides with him being topless at Fight Club. Finally, at the end of the film, he is depicted running through the streets in his boxer shorts.

The sight of the men fighting is the most dominant of these images and says the most about their colour, as it is then that their bodies are most evident. These images of the men, bare-chested and fighting each other, is reminiscent of standard boxing films such as Rocky or Raging Bull, in this regard. Dyer takes particular note of this as one of
the two categories of films that display male semi-nudity; these are “the boxing film and the adventure film in a colonial setting” (1997: 146). The latter is then divided into three categories: the Tarzan films of the first half of the twentieth century, the Italian ‘peplum’ films produced between 1957 and 1965, and “since the mid-1970s, there have been vehicles for such muscle stars as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, Claude Van Damme and Dolph Lundgren” (1997: 146). Viewers watching Fight Club will be most familiar with this last sub-category. While Brad Pitt and Edward Norton do not fit in with these muscle-bound actors, the tradition is still evident. They are much slimmer, less bulky and more natural, and while they still have very defined physiques, they look less formidable than the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger. It is in this state of potential vulnerability, stripped of their coded clothing, which the men fight.

Stripped down, the white male subject becomes symbolic in two regards. On the one hand his whiteness is seen to represent light and purity. Dyer refers to this as ‘the light within’ which makes ‘whites special’ (1997: 208). However, he also sees that “modern man must struggle to see, let alone regain this [light within]” (1997: 208). This struggle can be understood if put in historical context. In the past whiteness has been used to signify racial purity through such movements as the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan aspirations of the Nazi Party, culminating in the Holocaust, as an attempt at ‘cleansing human dirt’ (1997: 209-10).

On the other hand, the ‘nothing’ aspect of whiteness can also signify death. Dyer recounts: “It is said that when sub-Saharan Africans first saw Europeans, they took them for dead people, for living cadavers. If so, it was a deadly perception, for whites may not only embody death, they also bring it” (1997: 209) and “White people have a colour, but
it is a colour that also signifies the absence of colour, itself a characteristic of life and presence" (1997: 207). So whiteness can also be seen as pale, as deathly. This desire to be associated with light and away from all that is base and dirty also symbolises a progression towards death.

However, this whiteness is also an ideal conception and one that is easily tainted: “This light, which is white, is dirtied (‘stained’) by blood, passion, movement, which is to say, isn’t it, life” (1997: 208). When it is ‘tainted,’ it also shows up this discolouration easily. As Alfred Hitchcock said on CBS television on 20 February 1977, “Blondes are the best victims. They’re like virgin snow which shows up the bloody footprints.” Blood on a white surface or person creates a stark contrast. In film, blood often also looks black. It looks like the white skin of the characters is being marred with dark patches and bruises. The fighters in Fight Club are visibly tainted by blood, dirt and various scars and bruises as they try to ‘hit bottom,’ rather than reach for an ideal of whiteness associated with light and nothing, and in that process they hope to become something.

To look thoroughly at this matter, it is also necessary to look back at the relationship formed with black as a racial category. As Dyer states, we are much more used to seeing black men semi-naked: “Until the 1980s, it was rare to see a white man semi-naked in popular fictions... This was not so with non-white male bodies. In the Western, the plantation drama and the jungle adventure film, the non-white body is routinely on display” (1997: 146). One notable exception to this statement, however, would be Marlon Brando’s performance in A Streetcar Named Desire (1951). The black male, through his general associations with labour and ‘getting his hands dirty’ (both
literally and figuratively) is less shocking, and it could even be said that visually it is less noticeable. Symbolically, the contrast is not a simple one:

In the realm of categories, black is always marked as a colour (as the term ‘coloured’ egregiously acknowledges), and is always particularizing; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything – white is no colour because it is all colours. (Dyer, 2000: 734)

However, a whiteness smeared in blood and dirt, or perhaps tanned from the sun, suddenly becomes a colour.

However, the colours also need to be examined without their racial underpinnings. The penguin, which has already been analysed in relation to spirituality, also functions as a strong visual image in the film, one that Fincher undoubtedly relished for its visual and connotative aspects as well. Beyond looking at it as a flightless bird and shamanistic power animal, it is also a distinctly coloured bird, one that is characteristically stark black and white. This is also notable in the film since this binary is alluded to in many other ways in the film. The ‘coffee table in the shape of a yin-yang’ ties these two colours to a spiritual understanding of good and evil, good represented by white and evil by black. The members of Project Mayhem are also depicted wearing black, as well tuxedos while waiting tables at the hotel (a connotation it shares with the penguin); this also ties it to certain class concerns and understandings of high class and low class attire and further complicates their depiction as blue-collar workers. The support group leader also starts this session asking the members to: “Imagine your pain as a white ball of healing light” (my emphasis). This ‘white healing light’ is obviously being contrasted with darkness, pain and death since it comes straight after Chloe has described overcoming her fear of death. When the narrator enters his cave, it is a white ice cave that
starkly contrasts the black parts of the penguin and Tyler also addresses the space
monkeys with “You are not a beautiful or unique snowflake.”

The most concentrated references to the two colours can be found in the narrator’s
utterances after he disfigures the blonde Angel Face. Through his voiceover, he states:

I felt like putting a bullet between the eyes of every panda that wouldn’t screw to
save its species. I wanted to open dump valves on oil tankers and smother all
those French beaches I’d never see. I wanted to breathe smoke. I felt like
destroying something beautiful.

The narrator has again invoked a black and white animal, this time a panda, which he
wants to kill. He describes wanting to pour oil onto the sandy beaches in France and
breathe smoke (which is generally gray or black) instead of clean, transparent air. What is
being illustrated here is his desire to destroy and pollute everything he sees as white and
pure. What is happening here is that Tyler is attacking everything he sees as pure,
anything that is pure black or pure white needs to be befouled. This can be seen in the
way he does not propose the replacement of one religion with another, say Christianity
with the Occult, instead he merely wants to delegitimise existing theories as a form of
nihilism.

There are obviously many other associations that come out when blackness is
contrasted with whiteness. Moving back to an investigation of race, Dyer concludes that
the films he is looking at “share a perspective that associates whiteness with order,
rationality, rigidity, qualities brought out by the contrast with black disorder, irrationality
and looseness” (2000: 736). So Fight Club is able to associate these themes of ‘disorder,
irrationality and looseness’ with whiteness by depicting a predominantly white group, a
group that is eager to shed its prestige and symbolic power and test its actual physical
strength against the other in an attempt to become more alive. It is also ironic that in the Fight Club bouts the narrator is comprehensively beaten by two fighters: Bob, the feminised mother figure, and a black fighter. This fact creates the conception that Fight Club is concerned with a white male journey. Even though it does include other ‘token’ characters from other races, its principle characters are white males attempting to wrestle with a white economic and social condition. This can be linked to Carol Clover’s work on *Falling Down* (1993) entitled: ‘White Noise’ (1993), the fight becomes a white man’s masculinity crisis.
Fight Club, Raging Bull and a Violent Aesthetic

*While I agree that Raging Bull puts masculinity in crisis, I don’t think it offers a radical critique of either masculinity or violence, even though it is profoundly disturbing.*

- Pam Cook

This brings us to arguably the most talked about aspect of *Fight Club*, its violence. There are various points of contact and divergence between Martin Scorsese’s depiction of a man violently confronting a masculinity crisis in the late 1940s in *Raging Bull* and the narrator in crisis in 1990s *Fight Club*. The depictions of the two love interests can be argued as quite different, while the assault of a ‘pretty boy’ (Janiro in *Raging Bull* and Angel-Face in *Fight Club*) can be seen as almost identical. What is most useful in this study, however, is a look at the reasons for the fighting in the two films in the way they both employ masochism to work through their respective crises.

In her article on *Raging Bull* entitled ‘Masculinity in Crisis?’, Pam Cook states that, “Jake’s story is about the breakdown of one man and the emergence of another” (1982: 45). This transition is what is most important to this comparison, as we begin to see *Fight Club*’s narrator as transforming himself into a new man through fighting by the end of *Fight Club* as well.

As many critics have correctly noted, Jake’s strength is perceived through how much punishment he is able to endure, not how much he is able to deliver (Grindon, 1996: 67). This point is again made in reference to *Fight Club* when Amy Taubin writes: “As in Scorsese’s films, the male body is feminised through masochism. You prove your masculinity not by how much pain you can inflict, but by how much pain you can endure” (1999: 17).
Raging Bull was initially heavily criticised for portraying “a totally unsympathetic character: the boxer Jake La Motta, a brutal and violent man whose only capacity was for taking punishment” (Borden, 1995: 61). This masochism is shown through the way he taunts his brother to hit him, the way he lets Sugar Ray Robinson and others repeatedly hit him without offering any resistance, and the way he punches and head-butts the wall of his cell near the end of the film. O’Shaughnessy and Stadler take particular note of him head butting the wall: “This self-destructive violence is directed specifically against the head, the source of rationality and control” (2002:250). Lizzie Borden also takes note of his reaction to losing to Sugar Ray Robinson as “punishment for bad things he’d done in his life. Jake’s pleasure in being punched is redemptive, but it’s also a form of sexual masochism” (1995: 61). While both Raging Bull and Fight Club deal extensively with men fighting each other, they both centre on the endurance of pain rather than inflicting it on another. Enduring pain can just as easily be self-inflicted as inflicted by another, which explains both films’ use of masochism and self-beatings.

Masochism is clearly tied to this conflict as a way of substituting bodily pain for the emotional pain with which the fighters are unable to deal. Grindon describes this in terms of ‘the conflict of modernity,’ “in which the complex forces of the metropolis disorient and overwhelm the individual. The boxer experiences the pain of victimisation while being blocked from directly confronting his tormentors” (1996: 57). This sees its realisation through “[e]thnic identification intersected with class difference, characterizing the boxer as a poor worker selling physical labour in an industrial economy which found little value in his skills. As a result, the boxer generally represents an oppressed underclass struggling to rise” (1996: 55). However, this is obviously more
apparent in some fighting films than others. In *Raging Bull*, Jake is not initially depicted as down and out, but he later clearly enjoys the trappings of his success. This can be seen in his move from the cramped flat at the beginning to the house later on, along with signifiers such as his car and television. However, in *Fight Club*, the narrator wants to descend.

This impulse is explored by Grindon, who writes:

> The boxer, stripped bare in the face of his opponent, harks back to man’s primitive origins before even his skills as a tool maker distinguished him. As noted above, the boxer, enclosed by the metropolis, yearns for the farm or the village and expresses ambivalence divided between a desire for assimilation into the dominant culture and a return to his native, ethnic community. (1996: 64)

This impulse to become simple again is problematised through the negative view of the boxer as a savage. Jake is the one heard shouting, “I’m not an animal!” Notwithstanding, his trajectory is mapped with references to physical deterioration, marked by becoming obese and scarred as a result of the fighting (Grindon, 1996: 55). By the end of the film it does not look like he has gained anything by being a fighter (both in his personal life and in the ring); he has lost his wives, his brother, even his title appears to mean nothing to him to the point where he hammers the jewels out of his championship belt.

In contrast, the narrator in *Fight Club* gains what he really desires from fighting, and only loses that which he would rather not have. While the fighters tend to descend towards the savage, Tyler becomes more associated with this role of the fighter as savage and ‘retributive man’ and the narrator distances himself from Tyler at the end, looking like a civilised ‘new man’ in comparison.
The fights in *Fight Club* can be divided into four types: the narrator fighting Tyler, Tyler and the narrator fighting other members of Fight Club, the narrator fighting his boss and Tyler fighting Lou. Of these, three are completely masochistic: when the narrator is fighting Tyler he is actually beating up himself, he is also beating up himself when he confronts his boss. Tyler is completely submissive in his fight with Lou as well. These fights are about enduring pain, rather than delivering it or beating an opponent.

The narrator says in his voiceover while he is being beaten by the black fighter, “Fight Club wasn’t about winning or losing, it wasn’t about words. When the fight was over, nothing was solved, but nothing mattered. Afterwards we all felt saved.” The narrator feels redeemed merely by fighting and appears to learn and develop from it. Slavoj Žižek describes the point of the fighting in the film as: “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” (2003: 117) as it precipitates “a violent reformation of the very substance of a subject’s being – therein resides the lesson of *Fight Club*” (2003: 119). The redeeming and reformatory process is clearly evident in both films with the ability to withstand punishment coming out as the true measure of a man and a valuable way of dealing with a masculinity crisis.

Žižek provides the most enlightened view of *Fight Club*’s violence. In ‘The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link’ he describes how the film relates to masochism and master figures, such as when the narrator confronts his boss:

[W]hen Jack beats himself in front of his boss, his message to his boss is: “I know you want to beat me; but, you see, your desire to beat me is also my desire, so, if you were to beat me, you would be fulfilling the role of the servant of my
perverse masochist desire. But you are too much of a coward to act out your desire, so I will do it for you – here you have it, what you really wanted. Why are you so embarrassed? Are you not ready to accept it?” (2003: 117)

In this regard it is also useful to look at when the narrator confronts Tyler:

Already at a purely formal level, the fact of beating up oneself renders clear the fact that the master is superfluous: “Who needs you for terrorizing me? I can do it myself!” It is only through first beating up (hitting) oneself that one becomes free: the true goal of this beating is to beat out that which in me attaches me to the master. When, toward the end, Jack shoots at himself (surviving the shot, effectively killing only “Tyler in himself,” his double), 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). (Žižek, 2003: 117) (Author’s emphasis)

It is unclear exactly what Žižek means by ‘the system’ here since it can be read two different ways in the film. The first way could refer to ‘the system’ represented by the narrator’s boss and Lou. They effectively beat this system by getting their way with both of them. The more likely reading, however, is the larger capitalist system that extends beyond these two men. This becomes a problem, however, since, as Žižek notes, the fighting only serves this ‘reformative’ role on a personal level. As soon as it forms part of the political dealings of Project Mayhem, it loses its purpose and becomes pointless violence (2003: 121), from which even the narrator feels the need to distance himself.

So, to some extent, his fighting allows the narrator to develop to the point where he can dispense with his teacher and have a normal relationship with a woman in an environment that he no longer sees as alienating, without it destroying him, the way it does destroy Jake La Motta. However, for the narrator, the violence does not extend beyond the personal. It facilitates his finding a partner, but he is unable to continue this
violent line (or is rather not depicted as following this line) beyond the end of the film. By distancing himself from the activities of Project Mayhem and its leader, and with no developed political theory to fall back on, the narrator is left with nothing beyond his relationship with Marla, the goal of the narrative.

On behalf of the audience, the violence can also be seen as enabling the audience to indulge in the violence as catharsis (Remlinger, 2001: 149). The audience is able to guiltily enjoy the fights, while later being able to distance themselves from these gratuitous scenes due to the ending. In an ironic twist, the censorship of the film’s violence also appears to have allowed audiences to enjoy it even more. In a review of the ‘Definitive Edition’ DVD release, Tim Isaac (2007) describes how the most brutal scene in the film, the mutilation of Angel Face, was significantly censored with visuals cut out and the sound effects toned down. Isaac recounts how:

"It was a stupid decision as it’s amongst the most important scenes in the film. I was lucky enough to see an uncut version on my first viewing and, largely because of the sound effects, the final moments of Angel Face’s beating elicit a sharp intake of breath from the entire audience. … It’s that moment where rather than revelling in the Fight Club mayhem, you suddenly begin to wonder whether this is less about liberation and more about fascism, only for the narrator to catch up with you a few minutes later with the death of Robert Paulson. (2007: 31)"

The censorship leaves the violence as harsh but endurable. The film also clearly distances itself from the fighting by having the narrator turn from this violence and kill off Tyler. Critics that take offence at the depiction of violence tend not to take the ending into account, focussing on the violence as spectacle. However, the violence is left as a spectacle enclosed within a narrative that does not espouse it. The violence is subverted and turned away from by the narrator, and excused by the film’s pacifist ending.
The Ending

Fight Club is not about its ending but about its action.

- Roger Ebert

The last two chapters of Chuck Palahniuk’s novel display the film’s most significant digression from the novel. The second last chapter, chapter 29, incorporates the final sequence from the film with Marla meeting the narrator “on top of the Parker-Morris Building with the gun stuck in [his] mouth” (Palahniuk, 2003: 203) but begins with a short section in the Paper Street house where Tyler forces the narrator out of bed and into a car to the Parker-Morris Building. The chapter closes with the narrator pulling the trigger. However, the chapter also contains many digressions. The novel describes the narrator’s desire to live: “My will to live amazes me” (2003: 202). However, it also describes his apparently contradictory desire to die: “Oh, Tyler, I hurt. Just kill me here … Kill me, already. Kill me. Kill me. Kill me. Kill me.” (2003: 203). The reference to his will to live appears to be referring to his physical resilience, to his amazement that his body refuses to die as he says this while he is describing his physical state: “I’m a bloody tissue sample dried on a bare mattress” (2003: 202). His desire to die is related to the predicament in which he finds himself with Tyler and the ‘theatre of mass destruction’ he has created.

The narrator’s will to die is a reaction to not wanting to cooperate with Tyler any longer. When he voices this, Tyler refers directly to killing Marla, which is much less explicit in the film:

I say, no. You’ve used me enough.
"If you don't cooperate, we'll go after Marla."
I say, lead the way.
"Now get the fuck out of bed," Tyler said, "and get your ass into the fucking car."
(2003: 203)

The film roughly follows the novel for the rest of the chapter, except for a few details. Firstly, God is referred to when the narrator says, "To God, this looks like one man alone, holding a gun in his own mouth" (2003: 203-4). These references to God become more prominent in the next chapter. Secondly, when Marla meets him on the building, she comes of her own accord, not kidnapped by the space monkeys. She also brings the support group members with her:

"We followed you," Marla yells. "All the people from the support group. You don't have to do this. Put the gun down."

Behind Marla, all the bowel cancers, the brain parasites, the melanoma people, the tuberculosis people are walking, limping, wheel-chairing toward me. (2003: 204)

Marla also explains her feelings for the narrator more clearly than the film manages to do with her sudden change of heart, clasping the narrator's hand. With the barrel in the narrator's mouth, she states: "It's not love or anything," Marla shouts, "But I think I like you, too" (2003: 205).

Lastly, the novel states that the Parker-Morris Building (where Tyler, the narrator and Marla are standing) was also supposed to blow up, but that because of the ingredients Tyler chose to use in that particular explosive mixture, it does not: "The barrel of the gun tucked in my surviving cheek, I say, Tyler, you mixed the nitro with paraffin didn't you. Paraffin never works" (2003: 205). With that, the narrator pulls the trigger and the chapter ends.
Chapter 30, the last chapter in the novel, displays the film’s major departure. To begin with, it contains many references to God, heaven and the Bible. The first line in the chapter is “In my father’s house are many mansions” (2003: 206), this being a direct quote from the Bible, John chapter 14 verse 2, where Jesus describes heaven to his disciples. Thereafter, the narrator continually refers to the place he is in as heaven, “Everything in heaven is white on white …. Everything in heaven is quiet, rubber-soled shoes” (2003: 206), “People write to me in heaven and tell me I’m remembered. That I’m their hero” (2003: 207) and “The angels here are the Old Testament kind” (2003: 207). It becomes clear that the heaven the narrator is describing is actually a psychiatric hospital with its ‘paper cups of meds’ (2003: 207) where the angels are nurses and God is the superintendent. This shows a continued engagement with religious motifs and theology, which by this stage in the film, are long abandoned. It also shows that the narrator at the end is still mentally disturbed, confusing life with death.

This chapter, which clearly takes place after the building collapse and the ‘suicide attempt’ also still displays a certain dualism within the narrator. While he is talking, contrary statements appear to contradict what he is saying. When he says, “Of course, when I pulled the trigger, I died” we have the accusation, “Liar” (2003: 206). When he says, “Everything in heaven is white on white” this is followed by the statement, “Faker” (2003: 206). This clearly shows the presence of a dualism that strongly resembles a ‘Tyler-like’ half still present, belligerently contradicting and exposing the narrator’s lies. In the film we are led to believe that the shot to the head kills Tyler once and for all and that the narrator is free to live without his influence. The only thing that slightly complicates this is the penis splice, but this is extrinsic to the narrator.
In a discussion with ‘God,’ the narrator also sheds light on what his experiences with Tyler have taught him:

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 or trash, 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. (2003: 207)

While it appears that God, both the man in front of him and the narrator’s view of religion in general, would have him believe that humans are special, and Tyler’s teaching has taught him that humans are the “crap of the world,” the narrator has chosen to take up a third position: that humans ‘just are.’ This is congruent with the work done this far on the integration of the shadow, individuation allowing for a self to emerge that that can bring both sides into balance. This results in a more balanced narrator than the one provided in the film wherein the narrator still strongly resembles his former self before Tyler and appears to have learned very little. The novel has therefore managed to create a believable psychological state for the narrator and continue subverting and contradicting messages.

Marla and the narrator are also not together, but she writes to him from the outside. He also writes of wanting to phone her: And if there were a telephone in Heaven, I would call Marla from Heaven and the moment she says, “Hello,” I wouldn’t hang up. I’d say, “Hi. What’s happening? Tell me every little thing” (2003: 207). This shows a fairly lukewarm response to her, as if hanging up is actually an option, and his questions are far from passionate. He follows this by saying, “But I don’t want to go back. Not yet”
This is far from the film’s representation of a couple happily holding hands, poised to have a ‘normal relationship.’

The last aspect to be looked at is the narrator’s relationship with the space monkeys. By the end of the film, it is apparent that the narrator would rather have nothing to do with them and their cause. They are still willing to serve him, but he shows no desire to be their leader, he merely orders them off. In the novel, his relationship is much more ambivalent. He states the reason that he does not want to go back yet is ‘[b]ecause every once in a while, somebody brings me my lunch tray and meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches, and he says: “We miss you Mr. Durden.”’ (2003: 208) and “Everything’s going to plan” (2003: 208). The narrator does not appear to be repulsed by the idea, even though this is a possible reading of why he is unwilling to go back. Instead, it appears that he is waiting for them to be ready for his return, and for him to lead them again. This is again emphasised by the final, whispered, line of the novel: “We look forward to getting you back” (2003: 208). The ending of the book is therefore much more ambivalent than the ending to the film in relation to its politics as well.

The ending of the film presents two aspects that need to be analysed if its full meaning and message are to be grasped: the falling towers and the normative couple holding hands. In looking at the falling towers it is useful to look back at Jameson’s notion of the technological and structural sublime:

The other of our society is in that sense no longer Nature at all, as it was in precapitalist societies, but something else which we must now identify. I am anxious to that this other thing not overhastily be grasped as technology per se, since I will want to show that technology is here itself a figure for something else [namely multinational capitalism (1991: 37)]. Yet technology
may well serve as adequate shorthand to designate that enormous properly human and anti-natural power of dead human labor stored up in our machinery – an alienated power … which turns back on and against us in unrecognizable forms and seems to constitute the massive dystopian horizon of our collective as well as our individual praxis. (1991: 35)

According to Jameson, our praxis has led to the creation of a dystopian landscape that, even though we created it through technological and economic advancement, is now foreign and foreboding to the human mind (as has been explored previously). To get to grips with this sense of the structural sublime, Jameson analyses postmodern buildings such as the Bonaventure Hotel to help understand this aspect of the postmodern landscape:

I am proposing the notion that we are here in the presence of something like a mutation in built space itself. My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace, as I will call it, in part because our perceptual habits were formed in the older kind of space I have called the space of high modernism. The newer architecture therefore … stands as something like an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible dimensions. (1991: 38-9)

Jameson then compares this to Kevin Lynch’s work on city space, looking at how the individual subject is set in relation to “that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of societies structures as a whole” (1991: 51). The landscape that the narrator and Marla look over at the end can be seen as a landscape representing that which they do not understand, and for the narrator it represents that which he has up to this time been directly complicit in creating as part of the larger system. He has been slaving away in an office, doing a job that has reduced human
beings to statistics and helped turn him into a 'drone’ that has left him completely out of touch with his own individuality and with his own mortality. The falling of the towers also depicts the falling of the capitalist structure, however this is completely aesthetic since we have no factual evidence as to how important the buildings actually are, as well as the fact that the various other aspects of capitalism remain. The felling of the towers functions as a symbol of bringing down capitalism and materialism, or a good start, but the narrator is not left poised to continue this fight. As he watches the massive towers fall, he is able to take a step closer to regaining his life (i.e. a wife), even though he did not consciously destroy them and he has killed the part of him that did. He again appears to be passive in his situation, merely living with the consequences of other’s actions without changing his life himself.

The sublime towers crashing down also symbolises the end of the sublime journey the narrator has been walking. The destruction of the towers brings him back to the reality of a normal life shared with Marla.

Looking back at Jameson’s description of the ‘technological’ landscape becoming the ‘other’ previously inhabited by nature, it is also tempting to view the towers as falling trees the narrator has felled. However, they do call for a more obvious reading as well: they are phallic. Before claims of the film as ‘quasi-feminist’ resurface however, one needs to acknowledge the other aspect of the closing scene: the couple holding hands.

*Fight Club*’s ending and narrative closure shows a regressive move back to Mulvey’s Western ending, with either the hero riding off into the sunset alone, or getting married and becoming integrated into civilized society (1989: 33). She writes how: “Here two functions emerge, one celebrating integration into society through marriage, the other
celebrating resistance to social demands and responsibilities, above all those of marriage and the family, the sphere represented by woman” (Mulvey, 1989: 34). “[T]he rejection of marriage personifies a nostalgic celebration of phallic, narcissistic omnipotence” (Mulvey, 1989: 33), but this comes at the detriment of the resistant aspects of the two characters. Tyler’s teachings appear to be completely forgotten as the narrator wonders how clean the gun is and happily joins a woman poised for a life of domestic bliss. While Marla’s independence is quickly discarded as she accepts the man she only moments earlier was describing as ‘the worst thing to ever happen to her.’ With this ending, the two appear to have reached the only purpose for their part in the narrative: the goal of marriage and ‘marriageability’ (Mulvey, 1989: 33), with a backdrop of revolution and destruction.
Conclusion

Tyler's nihilism and incipient fascism are not the values Fight Club espouses, though Fincher complicates the issue by making Tyler so alluring and charismatic.

- Amy Taubin

It is very easy to get mired in the pastiche of ideas contained in Fight Club, entangled in its many messages and allusions. In many ways, Fight Club succeeds in creating ambiguous assertions, managing to be a 'self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement' (Hutcheon, 1989: 1-2). In many respects the film appears to be rather polyvalent, both in content as well as aesthetics, as it manages to accommodate contradictory notions surrounding politics, religion and sexuality. It has also juggled, successfully or otherwise, complex film and critical theory including film noir, psychoanalysis, Marx and Nietzsche. This has given critics ample material to explore and expand upon. In attempting to grapple with this juggling act, Diken and Laustsen describe the film itself, along with its narrator, as being schizophrenic:

The film is both commercial blockbuster and a critique of consumer society. It demonstrates both modernist techniques (e.g. flashbacks in flashbacks, Brechtian epic cuts in which the narrator directly addresses the audience by breaking dramatic illusions, and so on) and pop-art. It is simultaneously loaded with motifs of the Christ (e.g. fights take place in parking lots and basements as the early Christian meetings in caves) and Nietzschean motifs of the anti-Christ. It refers both to the Frankfurt style pessimism/elitism (may I never be content, deliver me from...) and mass movement (fascism), and so on. Fight Club is both violence and comedy, both popular culture and avantgarde art, both philosophy and pop-philosophy at the same time, in the same schizophrenic package. (2001: 5-6)

This also displays Lyotard's description of postmodern texts 'dispersing' coherent narratives into "clouds of narrative language elements" (1984: xxiv). It can be seen as
“shifting the emphasis from the ends of action to its means” (Lyotard, 1984: 37-8) as the audience become lost in the clouds of ideas and allusions.

Descriptions such as these help to account for the density of the text, the contradictory interpretations and also perhaps why it took time and the DVD format to make the film a commercial success. Viewers required time to pick apart the dense narrative with its vast collection of ‘hip’ ideas, exploring the assertions and allusions. Over time, audience members were able to mull over ideas and focus in on certain aspects that may have been lost on the first, overwhelming viewing. The twist at the end no doubt added to the confusion. Upon re-watching it, audience members were then afforded the opportunity to select the provocative idea that suited them and lavish in it. Reviewers appear to have gone through the same process, sifting through the text to select an idea to focus on and explore through the course of a review. However, in hindsight, the conclusions drawn in the immediate press appear extremely shortsighted and unable to account for the film’s ambiguity and polyvalency, along with the way it often subverts the ideas it initially posits. Over time more thorough analyses have come to light that have been more able to come to terms with these aspects of the film from a distance, and not merely the knee-jerk reactions initially presented.

Roger Ebert appears to be one of the few reviewers who managed to pick up on this trend, describing how he feared that, “[a]lthough sophisticates will be able to rationalize the movie as an argument against the behavior it shows, my guess is that the audience will like the behavior but not the argument” (1999). This statement sums up the ethical dilemma the audience is left with by the end of the film: a feeling of guilty pleasure at enjoying the bare knuckle violence, the rampant bi/homo/heterosexuality, the
anarchist bombings and the general misanthropy espoused by Tyler, while the balanced narrator at the end, poised to have a normal relationship, seems bland and anticlimactic without Tyler. The film itself, however, manages to avoid this dilemma by displaying Tyler as having gone too far and killing him off at the end. As Susan Faludi writes in her review, this was done in a very similar way eight years earlier for women with *Thelma & Louise* (1991):

In movies, as sometimes in life, the most extreme stories can crystallize our everyday experience and speak to a common pain. In 1991, *Thelma & Louise* did that for women. Women who had never been nearly raped or had the desire to blow up a gasoline truck with a handgun or become a martyr by driving off the Grand Canyon in a turquoise Thunderbird took the drama of the distaff desperadoes to be their story and made it an anthem, a consciousness-raising buddy comedy. (1999: 89)

*Thelma & Louise* also managed to present wild and rebellious characters who the audience could vicariously live through, engaging in violent behaviour they themselves would never commit. These characters were then killed off, leaving the audience safe in the knowledge that characters such as these are not allowed to continue living and threaten their peaceful existence. *Fight Club* promotes our latent guilty desires, allowing them to run their course to destruction, and then silences them, leaving us with our actual association, the narrator, left happy and benefiting from his journey to his dark, shadow side. However, as has been stated, the danger lies in the way that Tyler is depicted and that this ‘alluring’ depiction might make too much of an impression and be difficult to let go of, leaving the audience more enthralled with his ‘behaviour’ than the film’s self-undermining ‘argument.’
However, the one aspect that is not undermined is the male hero’s journey towards masculinity. This contradicts Lyotard’s description of the ‘incredulity’ of postmodern texts to a “hero of knowledge [who] works toward a good ethico-political end – universal peace. … The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyagers, its great goal” (1984: xxiv). By the end of the narrative, the narrator’s search for peace in the form of an ‘ethico-political end’ is achieved, his great voyage toward the goal of getting married is complete. He has been assimilated back into patriarchal, heteronormative society. Revolutionary ideas surrounding religion and spirituality have been collapsed into the conception of father(figure)hood the film has presented, Tyler has become another father figure himself, and another religion. The film has undermined the concepts of fatherhood, religion and the teacher, but these are concepts it itself creates; building them up in a manner that it can easily destroy.

The purpose of the narrative journey also has a very clear goal by the end of the film, to get married. The film has not managed to undermine its view of traditional patriarchal hegemonic masculinity. While it has managed to question it in points, it merely re-establishes it by the end of the film, having the narrator happily holding Marla’s hand as if the many aspects of the film are merely phases the narrator has gone through. As Diken and Laustsen state: “Fight Club oscillates between liberation and servitude, between escape from society and microfascism. Indeed, it is as if in Fight Club everything subversive turns out to be regressive” (2001: 2). The conception of masculinity is again posited as “both beyond question and beyond description” (Rutherford, 1988: 22), even though it is momentarily threatened throughout the film, it
emerges unscathed at the end with the threats from feminism, queer theory and race studies being silenced by a regressive, traditional end to the film.

When Smith asked Fincher how he sees his past as a director of television commercials in relation to the apparently anti-consumerist message of the film, Fincher replied: “Well, I’m extremely cynical about commercials and about selling things and about the narcissistic ideals of what we’re supposed to be” (1999: 58). While Fincher might be ‘cynical’ about people trying to sell him things, one is left wondering how much of that cynicism remains at the end of his film. One is hard pressed to find a cynical message that survives the death of Tyler, and has not merely become regressive. The film has dislocated and disorientated the narrator so that he can be born again into the narrative, but he is born into a narrative of the sublime, taking on a mythic journey with his imaginary guide, never really touching the ground of actual experience and consequence. He is born into a strange, sublime space where men look like women and do not have testicles. By the end of the narrative, his many sojourns into revolutionary realms have returned him to a place very similar to the place he started in, a reality with one exception: he can now marry. Any questions surrounding the questioning of gender roles have been silenced through Bob and Tyler’s death, while Marla is left looking like the nurturing wife. The narrator is still wondering how clean the gun is as he still seeks a sanitised existence. Tyler is dead and the space monkeys are left with a leader who apparently no longer believes in the cause. Father figures have been questioned but by the end the narrator appears set to become one himself. Fighting is depicted as leading to murder while teachers become fathers or God figures themselves. The revolutionary ideas become undermined, while the traditional ideas remain intact. By the end of the film,
Fincher is left selling above all a very un-ironic view of masculinity, one solely focussed on marriage and setting up a heteronormative couple.

By the end of this study of *Fight Club* I am reminded of a quote from Chuck Palahniuk’s novel that recounts how the narrator once urinated on the Blarney Stone with his “fancy American piss rich and yellow with too many vitamins” (2003: 77). Fincher has managed to create a commercially successful film, a film that has kept viewers and critics talking for eight years. He has created an extremely dense text soaked with the vitamins that have exhilarated fans and provoked critics enough to keep them watching and writing. However, the vitamins only penetrate so far, with the kernel of the narrative, the stone itself, still remaining a rather old one. By choosing to close the film neatly, with all its revolutionary loose ends tied up morally, breaking away from the ambiguous ending of the novel, Fincher has silenced any truly revolutionary message the narrative might once have held. However, it appears that those still paying for re-releases of the DVD do not employ this level of scrutiny. Most viewers and repeat viewers seem happy to feast on the vitamins. As Stephen Hunter writes, “unlike so many of today’s movies, you actually come out feeling something, some spike of sensation” (1999). Sirc also records how his students “pointed out that there haven’t been too many films released lately that give you something to really think about” (2001: 424). While there might be more thought-provoking and theoretically grounded films available, they are clearly not the ones people are watching. This film, however, is being watched, and repeatedly at that.
List of References


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Director: Martin Scorsese
Screenplay: Paul Schrader, Mardik Martin
Photography: Michael Chapman
Editor: Thelma Schoonmaker
Production Design: Gene Rudolf
Cast: Robert De Niro, Cathy Moriarity, Joe Pesci, Frank Vincent, Nicholas Colasanto, Theresa Saldana

Director: Sam Mendes
Screenplay: Alan Ball
Photography: Conrad L. Hall
Editor: Tariq Anwar, Christopher Greenbury
Production Design: Naomi Shohan
Music: Thomas Newman
Cast: Kevin Spacey, Annette Bening, Thora Birch, Wes Bentley, Mena Suvari, Peter Gallagher, Allison Janney, Chris Cooper

*Fight Club* (1999)
Director: David Fincher
Screenplay: Jim Uhls (from Chuck Palahniuk’s novel)
Photography: Jeff Cronenweth
Editor: James Haygood
Production Design: Alex McDowell
Music: The Dust Brothers
Cast: Brad Pitt, Edward Norton, Helena Bonham Carter, Meat Loaf, Jared Leto
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Falling Down (1993, d/Joel Schumacher)
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Zodiac (2007, d/David Fincher)