“Only after Disaster Can We Be Resurrected”
The Crisis of Masculinity in
David Fincher’s Fight Club

Man’s Last Stand

A close-up of a man in his thirties, lying on a bed covered by immaculate white sheets. The static camera lingers on his vacant stare. From the off, a male, slightly lethargic voice starts narrating: “I will get up and walk the dog at six-thirty a.m. I will eat some fruit as part of my breakfast. I will shave. I will clean the sink after I shave.” Cut to an African-American man, also around thirty, sitting in a non-descript room, gazing apathetically into the camera. The same voice continues: “I will be at work by 8 a.m. I will sit through two-hour meetings. I will say ‘yes’ when you want me to say ‘yes.’ I will be quiet when you don’t want to hear me say ‘no!’” Cut to a bearded man in a scruffy black T-shirt with a blank expression on his face. “I will take your call. I will listen to your opinion of my friends. I will listen to your friends’ opinions of my friends. I will be civil to your mother.” Another cut to a man in a black suit and a matching blue tie. His face mirrors the empty gaze of his predecessors. The camera starts to zoom in on his eyes as the voice from the off goes through its litany of concessions: “I will put the seat down. I will separate the recycling. I will carry your lip balm. I will watch your vampire TV shows with you. I will take my socks off before getting into bed.” The camera is moving closer and closer to the man’s pupils. “I will put my underwear in the basket.” A rising drone begins to accompany the monologue. “And because I do this…” Cut. The howling of a cranked engine. The camera is showing the cockpit view from a car racing down a deserted highway. Then a rapid sequence of external shots exhibiting the front, the back, and the sides of a black sports sedan speeding along the road at high velocity. “I will drive the car I want to drive.” A score reminiscent of the opening fanfares of Monty Norman’s James Bond theme accompanies the next three words that are inserted in bold white letters over the shot of the moving car: “Man’s Last Stand.” The car seems to race straight into the camera and the ad ends with a red Dodge Charger logo on a black background.
This TV commercial\(^1\) for Chrysler’s Dodge subdivision was aired during the Super Bowl of 2010, the most prestigious and expensive advertising block in American television which at the time rated an average of 106 million viewers and became the most watched telecast in history. Placed into the context of the inherently aggressive and hyper-masculine sport of American Football, the narrative of the spot suggests an elemental crisis of masculinity: men have become emasculated and the perpetrators of this emasculation are manifold: women (“I will carry your lip balm”), a white-collar working environment (“I will sit through two-hour meetings”), a domestic sphere portrayed as innately feminine (“I will put the seat down”), household responsibilities (“I will walk the dog”), and the media (“I will watch your vampire TV shows with you”). In short: the Dodge commercial implies that men have been weakened by the various manifestations of late-capitalist consumer culture. Yet, in an unintentionally ironic moment of self-implosion, the advertisement also claims that consumerism might be the very answer to this crisis of masculinity: by complying with the requirements of a domesticated performance of masculinity, men have earned the right to buy a car that evokes a nostalgic mode of rugged masculine autonomy. This type of masculinity symbolically manifests itself through the slightly modified Bond-Theme, the suggestive vista of the endless American highway, and the fact that Dodge’s Charger brand started out as a so called ‘muscle car’ in the 1960s. In what could probably be described as a textbook aporia, the difference between cure and disease is nullified, since buying a specific brand of car is presented as the solution to a crisis of masculinity that is portrayed as a consequence of commodity culture.

A similar tension emerges from David Fincher’s 1999 screen adaptation (written by Jim Uhls) of Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 debut novel *Fight Club*, in which a nameless\(^2\) corporate employee (Edward Norton) invents a hyper-masculine alter ego named Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), who enables him to violently rage against the perceived feminization associated with late-capitalist consumerism. In an interview, the director summarizes the predicament of his protagonist, who is also the unreliable first-person narrator of the film, as follows: “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 social emasculation this everyman [the film’s narrator] is created” (Smith 60). Since the denouement of the plot reveals Tyler and the narrator to be the same person, Tyler’s liberationist rhetoric is identified as the subconscious desire of a white-collar worker who feels disenfranchised as a consumerist subject. According to Tyler, this crisis of the heterosexual male can only be resolved through a revolution against consumerism that would restore a primal scene governed by a Dar-

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\(^2\) Jim Uhls’ script and most critical writings refer to the film’s nameless narrator as “Jack” and I will follow this convention in this paper.
winian struggle for survival. As the ultimate outcome of his cataclysmic plan to bring about the “collapse of financial history” (02:05:30), Tyler envisions a post-consumerist arcadia in which men will hunt “elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. You will wear leather clothes that last you the rest of your life. You will climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. And when you look down you will see tiny figures pounding corn and laying strips of venison on the empty car pool lane of the ruins of a superhighway” (01:37:44). Or, as Tyler announces in Palahniuk’s novel: “Only after disaster can we be resurrected” (70).

The central ambiguity of *Fight Club* and the central concern of this paper is that Tyler’s proposed cure to the assumed crisis of masculinity ultimately reproduces the very iconography and ideology that Tyler intends to replace with his message of anarchy, violence, and destruction. This paradox manifests itself most vividly in the extra-diegetic fact that the narrator imagines his idea of authentic masculinity literally as Brad Pitt. The casting of a former underwear model as a perpetrator of crimes against consumerism is an indicator that Tyler’s liberationist message and the movie’s attitude towards this message should not be confused. While some initial academic criticism of *Fight Club* dismissed the film as a regressive and misogynistic glorification of male violence (cf. Giroux), Tyler’s anti-consumerist stance is delivered by an actor who is one of Hollywood’s most recognizable and commercially viable representatives; the ironic dissonance thus created between the rhetoric and the associations transported by Pitt’s performance will help to elucidate the film’s treatment of masculinity in crisis.

Scarring the Unmarked Case

The notion of a ‘crisis of masculinity’ has been around for a while now. Especially the 1990s saw a noticeable peak in cultural productions that postulated white masculinity to be under siege by feminism, multiculturalism, and demographic shifts in the workforce. Movies like *Falling Down* (1993), *Disclosure* (1994), *The Game* (1997), *Unforgiven* (1992), *Misery* (1990), *Magnolia* (1999), or *American Beauty* (1999) either explicitly or metaphorically depicted men struggling to come to terms with a changed cultural environment that no longer favored traditional performances of masculinity in which men are commonly seen as providers, protectors, and warriors. Self-help books along the lines of *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis* (2001) by Anthony W. Clark and the blatantly anti-feminist treatise *The Myth of Male Power* (1993) by Warren Farrell promised to mend the wounds purportedly inflicted on the white male body and psyche by a culture that “forced countless numbers of men to reconsider previously held beliefs about male roles and dominant masculinities” (Whitehead 48). Although studies like Mark Anthony Neal’s *New Black*
Man (2006) or bell hooks’ We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity (2003) also identify crisis tendencies within African-American masculinities, “[p]ost-sixties gender and racial struggles are most often conceptualized as a battle between ‘multiculturalists’ and the white, male spokesmen for unmarked normativity” (Robinson 2). While white heterosexual men were previously ‘invisible’ as the ‘unmarked case’ that dictated the parameters according to which other groups had to be defined, “white men have become marked man, not only pushed away from the symbolic centers of American iconography but recentered as malicious and jealous protectors of the status quo” (ibid. 5). Hence contemporary discourses of the crisis of masculinity tend to spotlight white males as the primary representatives of a patriarchal hegemony which has been destabilized by recent cultural, social, and political developments. As often as this crisis of masculinity has been announced in popular and critical writings, it has also been discarded as an ideological scheme to secure hegemonic power by putting men once again at the center of attention: “[I]n order for white masculinity to negotiate its position within the field of identity politics, white men must claim a symbolic disenfranchisement, must compete with various others for cultural authority bestowed upon the authentically disempowered, the visibly wounded” (ibid. 12).

Other interpretations propose that the discourse of a crisis of masculinity frequently depends on an outdated conceptualization of gender that presumes a fixed and essentialist entity: “many writings on the crisis of masculinity assume that men and their masculinity are homogenous and biologically indivisible, sustained by a natural order that has been severely threatened by women’s ‘misguided’ attempts to transform the gender ‘balance’” (Whitehead 56). Whether the crisis of masculinity is an actual, perceived, or even hegemonically constructed condition ultimately does not make much of a difference when considering that “the rhetoric of crisis gets used by white men to negotiate shifts in understandings of white masculinity” (Robinson 10). Since masculinity “might be in crisis when many men in a given context feel tension with larger ideologies that dominate or begin to dominate that context” (Reeser 27), the rise of feminism and the ensuing challenges to patriarchal power are conventionally identified as the catalyst for this reconfiguration of masculinity. Additionally, it is often “observed that the economic transition from industry to service, or from production to consumption, is symbolically a move from the traditional masculine to the traditional feminine” (Faludi 38). Even when avoiding Tyler’s polemic of socio-evolutionary atavism that separates the archaic categories of hunters and gatherers along a binary gender line, consumer culture is conventionally seen as a feminine sphere. While capitalism in general is conceptualized as aggressive, active, self-reliant and male, consumerism – although a manifestation of the same socio-economic system – is regarded as complacent, passive, and feminine. In accordance with Andreas Huyssen and Walter Benjamin, Swanson argues that “the feminine becomes inscribed onto mass

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4 Cf. Connell 88; Faludi 13-24; Robinson 2-6; Whitehead 48.
culture as a sign of its inauthenticity; imitative and reproductive, corrupted by the success of its own degenerative allure, mass culture is understood in terms of a feminine threat to civilization" (90). Faludi coins the terms “ornamental culture” (35) in order to explain the correlation between masculinity in crisis and consumerism:

> Constructed around celebrity and image, glamour and entertainment, marketing and consumerism, [ornamental culture] is a ceremonial gateway to nowhere. Its essence is not just the selling act but the act of selling the self, and in this quest every man is essentially on his own, a lone sales rep marketing his own image (ibid. 35).

Critics like Henry A. Giroux argue that Fincher’s *Fight Club* could be located securely in the context of regressive narratives that glorify male violence as a legitimate challenge to the discourse of consumer culture. According to Giroux: “If Jack represents the crisis of capitalism repackaged as the crisis of a domestic masculinity, Durden represents the redemption of masculinity repackaged as the promise of violence in the interest of social and political anarchy” (13). However, I will argue that *Fight Club* actually acknowledges the impossibility of a stable gender identity and indeed exposes the notion of violence as a regenerative force for masculinity as a myth.

**Remaining Men Together**

*Fight Club* deconstructs Tyler’s discourse of masculinity by mapping the crisis of its male characters onto the system of representation itself, i.e. the movie constantly exposes itself as a self-referential construct rather than a mimetic representation and thus problematizes the very idea of authenticity and coherence with which its protagonists operate. In *Fight Club* the representation of crisis also generates a crisis of representation. This becomes especially evident in one of the film’s early pivotal moments which shows Jack – prior to the schizophrenic creation of his alter ego Tyler – as he is sitting on the toilet, reading a catalogue. The camera zooms into an image from the catalogue and then cross-fades to a pan of Jack’s condo which looks exactly like the living room depicted in the catalogue. As Jack narrates from the off over the camera pan, each item of furniture mentioned in the monologue suddenly appears in the empty room with labels and short product descriptions popping up next to it, gradually transforming the barren apartment into the likeness of a generic living quarter typically displayed in furniture stores:

> Like everyone else, I had become a slave to the Ikea nesting instinct. If I saw something like a clever coffee table in the shape of a yin and yang, I had to have it. Like the Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern. Or the Rislampa wire lamps of environmentally-friendly unbleached paper. Even the Vild hall clock of galvanized steel, resting on the Klipsk shelving unit. I would flip through catalogs and wonder, “What kind of dining set defines me as a person?” We used to read pornography. Now it was the Horchow Collection. I had it all. Even the glass dishes with tiny bubbles and imperfections, proof they were crafted by the honest, simple, hard-working indigenous peoples of wherever (00:04:32-00:05:22).
Halfway through his monologue Jack walks through the shot, a phone to his ear as he orders another designer item from a mail order company, his skinny body obscuring some of the labels that continue hanging in the air.

By imploding the difference between the artificial construction of domesticity presented in the furniture catalogue and Jack’s apartment, this scene frames commodity culture as a realm of simulacra and simulations which seems to be taken right out of Jean Baudrillard’s writings on hyperreality. Baudrillard hyperbolically postulates a postmodern condition in which original and replica can no longer be distinguished from one another:

The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control – and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyper-real, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere (1993: 343).

Besides locating Jack in a “hyperspace without atmosphere,” the scene also suggests a symbolic castration as Jack has so utterly succumbed to the “Ikea nesting instinct” that he no longer masturbating to pornography but instead reads interior design magazines. Lethargic domesticity has replaced the male sex drive and the film makes a point of showing Jack seated on the toilet, his pants around his ankles, deliberately breaking with conventional representations of male physique in Hollywood cinema. During a guided meditation that he attends early on in the film, Jack is asked to envision his “power animal” (00:10:35) and he comes up with the image of a penguin, a flightless (read ‘castrated’) bird well known for the fact that its males actively participate in the nesting and incubation duties. Jack’s weary self-identification as a conspicuous consumer (“What kind of dining set defines me as a person?”) later prompts Tyler to call him “Ikea boy” (02:07:55), and since the only other name attached to the character is an alias he gives himself when visiting a support group for cancer patients, Jack is presented as a non-identity, an empty signifier in a consumerist hyperreality. In its opening scenes Fight Club links a crisis of referentiality to a crisis of male gender identity. For Jack, the inauthentic environment of late-capitalist consumerism cannot produce an ‘authentic’ male gender identity. The inauthenticity of consumerism and its allegedly emasculating effects become interchangeable: consumer culture is feminine and inauthentic and therefore the cause of a crisis of male identity.

At the beginning of the movie, Jack’s crisis of masculinity/authenticity manifests itself through bouts of insomnia which plunge him into an almost catatonic condition in which “everything is a copy of a copy of a copy” (00:03:45). Before subconsciously creating his alter ego Tyler as a non-conformist fantasia of male virility and assertiveness, Jack visits a variety of support groups in the hope of filling the void in his life. He joins the first group after his doctor tells him that he should not complain too much about his sleeplessness: “You want to see pain? Swing by First Methodist Tuesday nights. See the guys with testicular cancer. That’s pain” (00:06:00). In this
group called “Remaining Men Together” Jack, who pretends to also suffer from cancer, meets the heavily overweight Robert “Big Bob” Paulson (Meat Loaf), an ex-bodybuilder who invented a chest expansion program that was advertised on late night television. Another male victim of consumerism, Bob became obsessed with an ideal of the male body unattainable by natural means and started taking steroids. The steroid injections gave Bob testicular cancer – his testicles had to be removed, his business went bankrupt, and his wife divorced him. As part of the cancer therapy, Bob has to take hormone supplements which cause his body to overproduce estrogen and make him develop breasts. As the former spokesman for a profit-oriented chest expansion program whose body has grown female breasts, Bob literally embodies Tyler’s claim that consumerism turns men into women. Furthermore, Bob’s attempts to transfigure his body into the mimicry of a 1980s action hero à la Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger suggests that consumerism provides men with unfeasible models of masculinity that ultimately amplify the crisis tendencies in their gender performance.

The crisis at the centre of Fight Club is generated by the clash of two seemingly incompatible conceptualizations of masculinity that are nevertheless equally ingrained in the discourse of contemporary culture, i.e. the domestic male and the aggressive male. Whereas political and cultural discourses demand a restrained form of masculinity, the iconography of manhood as it emerges from the various transmutations of the male action hero in Hollywood cinema, in many advertisements and in professional sports, still favors a nostalgic notion of men as warriors and hunters. The rugged individualism of the American frontier hero is in many ways still the dominant paradigm of masculinity in American mainstream media, yet this paradigm is also steeped in a melancholic aura of the unattainable. In Fight Club, these two dominant conceptualizations of masculinity are presented as incongruent to the point where the film’s central character suffers a schizophrenic breakdown during which two different performances of male subjectivity are particularized in two different personas: the aggressive, violent, and self-reliant Tyler and the domestic, emasculated, passive Jack. By condensing the socio-cultural crisis of masculinity into a crisis of individual identity, Fight Club follows a pattern of individualization that Faludi identifies as central to the crisis of masculinity: “Instead of collectively confronting brutalizing forces, each man is expected to dramatize his own struggle by himself, to confront arbitrarily designated enemies in a staged fight – a fight separated from society the way a boxing ring is roped off from the crowd” (15). The support groups initially provide Jack with an alternative to this privatized performance of male identity as they emphasize the communal and communicative dimension of manhood. The men in the first group Jack joins out of curiosity are “Remaining Men Together,” i.e. their experience of masculinity is a shared one and the title leaves it open to interpretation whether they will remain men together despite having their testicles removed or whether they are the few remaining men who are able to adopt a societal idea of masculinity.
During the support group meetings, the men are asked to form “one-on-ones” in which two men embrace each other and “really open” themselves up (00:07:10). Jack reluctantly teams up with Bob and as the latter pushes Jack’s face between his breasts, Jack begins to cry himself into cathartic bliss: “Then something happened. I was lost in oblivion – dark and silent and complete. I found freedom. Losing all hope was freedom. Babies don’t sleep that well” (00:08:50). Jack’s insomnia is temporarily cured by his attendance of the support groups and he becomes “addicted” (00:09:20) to them, joining a different group each night in order to be able to sleep: “I wasn’t really dying, I wasn’t host to cancer or parasites; I was the warm little center that the life of this world crowded around. [...] Every evening I died and every evening I was born again. Resurrected. [...] This was my vacation” (00:10:01-00:11:15).

Considering that Jack’s crisis of masculinity is also a crisis of authenticity, the support groups seem to supply him with a form of experience that reaches beyond the commodified bubble of his existence. Consumer culture glosses over the frailty and transience of life by implying that the cure for every human predicament might be right around the corner. But in the support groups, Jack finds real pain, real suffering, and real death; he gains access to a world that eludes commodification and this brush with the realities of life briefly resolves his subconscious crisis. Of course, Jack himself is not sick and the genuineness he finds in the support groups is itself a simulacrum. He does not really leave his commodified lifestyle behind but vicariously participates in someone else’s pain. There clearly is a pornographic component to Jack’s sensation of release and his simultaneous disengagement from the suffering at hand. While the legitimate members of the support groups are actually forming a community and a reprieve from consumerism, Jack uses their forum as an extension of the very circumstance that is causing his insomnia. The authenticity of the groups is as artificial as the sense of individuality he hopes to acquire from purchasing a piece of designer furniture.

The simulation and its anodizing effects on Jack are shattered when he meets Marla Singer (Helena Bonham Carter) who is also frequents the support groups without being afflicted by any disease: “Marla – the big tourist. Her lie reflected my lie” (00:11:52). Significantly, Marla – unlike Jack – does not pretend to be sick when she visits the groups: she smokes in a lung cancer group and also joins “Remaining Men Together,” telling Jack that “[t]echnically, I have more of a right to be there than you. You still have your balls” (00:16:32). Marla is therefore not using the groups as a simulacrum but attends them for voyeuristic purposes that immediately signal her outsider status to the other participants. While ethically equally problematic, Marla receives a different form of satisfaction from the groups when compared to Jack’s full immersion. Marla’s pleasure belongs to the realm of representation (watching someone else’s suffering from a safe distance) whereas Jack participates in a simulation by pretending to be sick himself.
The First Rule of Fight Club is ... Franchising

After ‘inventing’ Tyler, Jack blows up his condo in the guise of his alter ego, making it look like a gas-leak accident, thus manifesting his subconscious desire to rage against commodity culture. Confronted with the ruins of his former life, Jack then ‘calls’ Tyler whom he believes to have met on an airplane the day before and moves in with him into an abandoned and dilapidated Victorian house in a deserted industrial district, explicitly disengaging from the comforts and aesthetics of consumerism. The movie then traces Jack’s self-education through his proxy Tyler. First Jack/Tyler start an illegal underground boxing club, i.e. the eponymous Fight Club, in which the “disenfranchised” male American workforce can reassert its masculinity in ritualistic one-to-one fist fights. After the failure of the support groups, Fight Club ostensibly provides Jack with another alternative to the hyperreal consumerism that has emasculated him, an arena in which men can prove themselves in front of other men by performing archaic rites of bonding and passage. Starting out in the cellar of a decrepit bar (which forms a sharp contrast to the church basements in which the support groups meet), Fight Club eventually branches out into most major American cities and attracts an increasing number of men who enter the club with bodies looking like “cookie dough” but within a few weeks are “carved out of wood” (00:41:50). As the self-declared patriarch of this underground self-help group, Tyler recites the rules of Fight Club at the beginning of each meeting:

The first rule of Fight Club is – you don’t talk about Fight Club. The second rule of Fight Club is – you don’t talk about Fight Club. The third rule of Fight Club is – when someone says “stop” or goes limp, the fight is over. Fourth rule is – only two guys to a fight. Fifth rule – one fight at a time. Sixth rule – no shirts, no shoes. Seventh rule – fights will go on as long as they have to. And the eighth and final rule – if this is your first night at Fight Club, you have to fight (00:44:21-00:44:58).

Whereas the support groups were based on communication and sharing, Fight Club constitutes an antipodal realm of silence and violence, reducing masculinity to a physical performance that is deemed to be redemptive in a culture eroded by therapy, conspicuous consumption, and domestication. One of the most noteworthy aspects about the mode of masculinity as it is acted out by the men in Fight Club, is the explicitly homoerotic iconography in which the film frames their physical interaction. During the fights the camera lingers on semi-naked men with muscular and perpetually sweaty bodies that pummel each other while spilling spit and blood. The soundtrack provides an exaggerated soundscape of flesh hitting flesh, of heavy breathing and quasi-aroused moaning. When the fight is over, the two contestants embrace each other in an imitation of post-coital exhaustion while being surrounded by a circle of cheering men. Fight Club explicitly turns masculinity into a spectacle of pornographic masochism, thus creating a discrepancy between Tyler’s narrative of traditional heteronormative manhood and the movie’s self-conscious implementation of homoerotic aesthetics. Both the
masochistic and the homoerotic components of Fight Club are the focus of several critical writings on the film. Lynn M. Ta, for example, suggests that the film’s masculinity-qua-masochism trope is strikingly paradoxical:

What is interesting about the solution of fighting, though, is that it feminizes Jack even as he seeks to reassert his masculinity. By fighting himself or deriving pleasure from taking a hit, he enjoys masochistic satisfaction that has been traditionally associated with feminine, for to be the aggressor is to be masculine and to receive this to be female (273).

Likewise, Robinson observes that masochism in general is a vital element in many representations of masculinities in crisis: “Masochistic narratives, structured so as to defer closure or a resolution, often feature white men displaying their wounds as evidence of disempowerment, and finding a pleasure in explorations of pain” (11). As a result of this convention, depictions of “wounded white men most often work to personalize the crisis of white masculinity and, thus, to erase its social and political causes and effects” (ibid. 8). However, the film deploys a variety of disruptive and metaleptic devices that complicate the relationship between Tyler and the viewer, thereby engaging in a meta-discourse about the representational trope of the wounded white man in American cinema. Jack believes that Fight Club provides him with a much realer experience than the support groups: after being hit by Tyler for the first time, he is utterly astonished by his pain: “It really hurts” (00:33:31). A closer examination of the ontology of Fight Club reveals, however, that this ‘authenticity’ is as illusionary as the simulated catharsis Jack experienced as a faker in the support groups: First and foremost, the initial fight between Jack and Tyler and with it the invention of Fight Club, is in fact a purely masochistic act during which Jack beats himself up in a parking lot, assuming both the roles of himself and Tyler in his imagination. While for the participants of Fight Club, its regenerative quality primarily depends on the man-to-man contest of the fights, the genesis of this movement is actually a self-referential event. Fight Club is conceived in a moment of masturbatory masochism. Additionally, Palahniuk’s novel describes how the narrator swings his fist at “Tyler’s jaw like in every cowboy movie we’d ever seen” (52f.), implying that this ostensibly authentic act of violence is already participating in a mediated process of signification before it even begins. When considering that Tyler sees in Fight Club a “generation of men raised by women,” and that Jack constantly complains about his lack of a male role model in his life (“Our fathers were our models for God. And, if our fathers bailed, what does that tell us about God?” [01:00:09]), his notion of violence as a crucial part of the male experience is not anchored in a social tradition but an idea derived from countless films and television shows that establish a close connection between masculinity and violence.

When Tyler asks Jack to hit him for the first time, the picture suddenly freezes and in one of many metaleptic disruptions in this movie, Jack begins to address the audience directly: “Let me tell you a little bit about Tyler Durden” (00:30:49). What follows is a brief montage of Tyler’s background story narrated by Jack, who at various points talks right into the camera. Among
other things, Tyler is shown working as a movie projectionist in a cinema where he splices frames of pornographic material into the reels of generic Hollywood blockbuster films with the intention of undermining the effeminizing system of post-industrial consumer culture with a subliminal message of hyperreal masculinity. When the montage ends, the film returns to a still image of Tyler and Jack in the parking lot, unfreezes it, and resumes the narrative from the moment Tyler asked Jack to hit him. The metaleptic shift thus frames the violence to follow in an entirely mediated context, implicitly connecting it to Hollywood films and pornography, thereby indicating that Jack’s experience of real pain is taking place in a self-referential film. 

Fight Club, like the support groups when viewed from Jack’s illegitimate position as a “tourist,” cannot function as a reprieve from consumerism but instead reduplicates the very system it sets out to subvert. It is part of the same “ornamental culture” in which men “confront arbitrarily designated enemies in a staged fight” (Faludi 15). As soon as Fight Club reaches a critical mass of members, Tyler begins to set up “franchises, all over the country” (01:45:25) like any other late-capitalist fast-food or coffeehouse chain. Tyler’s first and second rule of Fight Club – “You don’t talk about Fight Club” – implements a fairly conventional marketing strategy of generating exclusivity through implied exclusion (indeed, more and more men begin to join the club despite – or because of – Tyler’s first two rules). Additionally, the participants of Fight Club wear the wounds, scars, and bruises they receive during fights like fashion accessories, allowing members to recognize each other outside of Fight Club which only exists “in the hours between when Fight Club starts and when Fight Club ends” (00:41:35). Instead of shopping for khakis at Banana Republic, men join Fight Club and in a hyperbolically Marxist version of capitalist ideology, exchange suffering for signifiers. As is the case with any effectively branded fashion item, the members of Fight Club believe these scars to be unique material markers of actual violence, despite the fact that they received them in staged and strictly regulated fights. Following Baudrillard’s argument on the simulacrum here, the wounds and bruises acquired in Fight Club “substitute signs of the real for the real itself” (1993: 343).

The aporetic nature of Fight Club which evokes the inherent paradox of the Dodge TV spot, manifests itself most vividly in a scene where Jack and Tyler, brimming with masculine confidence from their last fight, step onto a bus and Jack points out a print ad for Gucci underwear, depicting a half-naked male model with accentuated abdominal muscles. From the off Jack muses “I felt sorry for all the guys packing into gyms, trying to look like what Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger said they should” (00:42:20). Mockingly, Jack asks Tyler: “Is that what a man looks like?” (00:42:30), whereupon Tyler depreciatingly shakes his head. Suddenly, Jack and Tyler are rudely pushed away by another man walking down the aisle and for a few brief seconds the potential of unrestrained violence hangs in the air but evaporates just as quickly. Exhausted by the pornographic spectacle of Fight Club, the men in fact shy away from violence outside the safety of the simulacrum that they have constructed for themselves. While Tyler insists that Fight Club provides
an antidote to the hyperreality of consumerism, the film exposes Fight Club as a continuation of the system itself: the next shot shows Tyler getting up from a beaten opponent in Fight Club, wearing nothing but a pair of tight red leather pants, and the camera prominently takes in Tyler's six pack and muscular torso that looks strikingly similar to the image of masculinity presented in the Gucci poster. The scene is edited in such a way as to establish a direct correlation between the Gucci model and Tyler, exposing the latter as an emblematic manifestation of a consumerist iconography of masculinity:

In a culture of ornament [...] manhood is defined by appearance, by youth and attractiveness, by money and aggression, by posture and swagger and 'props,' by the curled lip and petulant sulk and flexed biceps, by the glamour of the cover boy, and by the market-bartered 'individuality' that sets one astronaut or athlete or gangster above another (Faludi 38).

Jack's vision of authentic manhood is thus utterly congruent with the consumerist paradigm of masculinity as described by Faludi. This is further emphasized when Tyler's image is inserted briefly at two points in the movie as a single frame before Jack meets his alter ego for the first time, hence anchoring the idea of Tyler in the realm of the imaginary and the artificial. When considering that the actor Brad Pitt is dressed in an ostentatious form of punk haute couture throughout the movie and also modeled for a variety of fashion labels which helped to perpetuate the very image of the male body derided by Tyler, Fight Club once again undermines the essentialist gender discourse of its protagonists. By deliberately objectifying the male body as a spectacle, "attractive men are set up to inspire and to receive the gaze of the camera and of other characters" (Hirsch 13). Fight Club therefore enables a "sexually appraising gaze" on masculinity which is legitimized in a heteronormative context by the wounds these men display. However, this appraising gaze was "formerly reserved for the sexual woman only" (ibid.). Rather than re-masculating men, the film's aesthetics move masculinity closer to the representational conventions of femininity, placing men in the "very world women so recently shucked off as demeaning and dehumanizing" (Faludi 39).

Boon, Grenstad, and Ta suggest that Faludi's Stiffed, with its account of a crisis of masculinity caused by late-capitalist consumerism, can serve as a key text for an understanding of Fight Club. Whereas these critics primarily rely on Faludi in order to diagnose Jack in his initial frustration about his 'effeminate' existence as a passive consumer deprived of male role models, I would go a step further and suggest that in its cinematic realization, Fight Club not only depicts men as the victims of commodity culture, but simultaneously complicates the solution to this malaise offered by Tyler. While Stiffed certainly helps to historicize Jack's crisis of identity, it can also be applied to Fincher's distinct way of depicting this crisis in Fight Club. According to Faludi,

By the end of the American Century, every outlet of the consumer world - magazines, ads, movies, sports, music videos - would deliver the message that manhood had become a performance game to be won in the marketplace, not the workplace, and that male anger was now part of the show. An ornamental culture
encouraged young men to see surliness, hostility, and violence as expressions of glamour, a way to showcase themselves without being feminized before an otherwise potentially girlish mirror. But if celebrity masculinity enshrined the pose of the “bad boy,” his rebellion was largely cosmetic. There was nowhere for him to take a grievance because there was no society to take it to (37).

Although superficially informed by a similar stance against “ornamental culture,” Tyler’s rhetoric in *Fight Club* differs fundamentally from Faludi’s arguments:

I see in Fight Club the strongest and smartest men who have ever lived – an entire generation pumping gas and waiting tables; or they’re slaves with white collars. Advertisement has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don’t need. We are the middle children of history, with no purpose or place. We have no great war, or great depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives. We were raised by television to believe that we’d 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 (01:07:20-01:08:24).

While Tyler preaches violence and aggression as a remedy against the entrapments of “ornamental culture,” Faludi argues that “male anger” is indeed part of the problem. Consequently, Tyler’s ideology can be placed much closer to the aporetic gesture of the Dodge ad than to Faludi’s study. The fact that Tyler’s revolution initially only manifests itself as surface inscriptions on the bodies of his followers (i.e. their scars and wounds), indeed makes it a “largely cosmetic” rebellion as defined by Faludi.

**Soap Opera of Destruction**

In one of the pivotal scenes of the movie, Tyler kisses Jack’s hand and then pours lye on it, branding Jack with a chemical burn in the shape of his lips. Although the hand kiss establishes physical intimacy between the two men, it also feminizes Jack as the recipient of Tyler’s patriarchal gesture. Within seconds this intimacy is once again transformed into violence as the lye burns itself into Jack’s skin, suggesting that only through the heteronormative stabilizer of violence can male bonding be enacted in Tyler’s world. While Tyler claims that the pain of the chemical burn provides Jack with an important lesson in fragility (“First, you have to know that someday, you are going to die” [01:00:45]), the scar left by the burn also brands Jack like a cattle, marking him as Tyler’s property. Each member of Project Mayhem, the next phase in Tyler’s revolution, subsequently bears the lye kiss as another cosmetic inscription of Tyler’s increasingly totalitarian narrative. But as with the first fight between Jack and Tyler, the original lye kiss was a masochistic gesture (Jack kissing and burning his own hand) which retrospectively identifies the corporeal emblem as a self-referential signifier.

As a final scheme in his insurgency, Tyler founded a paramilitary terrorist organization called Project Mayhem. He realizes that the cathartic potential of Fight Club’s masochism has been exhausted since it privatizes suffering instead of attacking the society Tyler holds responsible for causing this suf-
Project Mayhem begins more or less harmlessly with a series of situationist pranks played against the insignias of consumerism (magnetizing the tapes in a rental video store, smashing status-symbol cars and satellite dishes with baseball bats, spraying a gigantic smiley face onto the façade of a corporate skyscraper) but eventually Tyler plans to rig the financial district of a major American city with explosives in order to erase all credit records and install a pre-consumerist utopia (in the novel Tyler intends to make a skyscraper collapse onto a museum, thus symbolically erasing history). Yet, even this act of terrorism remains, to rely on Faludi’s terminology, largely ornamental and cosmetic as the physical destruction of the buildings will not liberate American men from their debts and financial obligations (similarly, destroying a museum will not erase history). Instead, Tyler’s terrorism is designed to produce the very symbolic spectacle that could form an apposite pyrotechnical climax to the action movie as which *Fight Club* was originally advertised. Tyler’s strategies and the narrative demands of the movie become identical, suggesting that the leader of Project Mayhem is not interested in fundamentally altering the social conditions entrapping the American Everyman but in imitating the iconography of the Hollywood blockbuster. Released in 1999 *Fight Club* is a pre-9/11 movie that nonetheless anticipates what Baudrillard two years later was to call the “spirit of terrorism” in his controversial response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon:

> Never is it [terrorism] to attack the system through power relations. This belongs to the revolutionary imaginary imposed by the system itself, which survives by ceaselessly bringing those who oppose it to fight in the domain of the real, which is always its own. But it moves the fight into the symbolic domain, where the rule is the rule of challenge, of reversal, of escalation (2001).

Like *Fight Club*, Project Mayhem therefore offers no valid challenge to consumerism. In fact, it even extrapolates the problematic aspects of late-capitalism into a despotic dogma: the members of Project Mayhem are reduced to foot soldiers whom Tyler calls “space monkeys,” since they have to obey his orders without knowing the ultimate purpose of their actions (01:26:30); they are as much deprived of their identity as the consumerist subjects Tyler set out to emancipate. Tyler’s first rule of Project Mayhem is “You don’t ask questions about Project Mayhem” (hence moving from *Fight Club*’s marketing strategy to a bureaucratic need-to-know policy), and each new applicant has to stand three days and nights on Tyler’s/Jack’s porch while being humiliated by an enlisted member of Project Mayhem before being allowed to join the group, thereby creating a spiral of humiliation and degradation not unlike the masochism that fuels consumerism. The men then have to shave their heads, are only allowed to wear black clothing, must give up their names, and are assigned a variety of tasks in preparation of Tyler’s upcoming insurrection. All the while, Tyler indoctrinates them with aphorisms that are meant to correct a consumerist ideology which raised them to believe that they will be “millionaires and movies gods and rock stars”: “Listen up, maggots. 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. We are the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world” (01:27:00). Tyler simply replaces the generic means of creating identity through conspicuous consumption (“What kind of dining set defines me as a person?”) with a tyrannical eradication of identity (“But, in Project Mayhem, we have no names” [01:43:00]), which equally deprives the members of Project Mayhem of autonomy and agency. With its strict regulations and restrictions as well as its total devotion to the leader-figure Tyler, Project Mayhem ultimately becomes a proto-fascist organization.

At this point in the movie, Jack, who realizes that Tyler is building “an army” (01:27:07) with his “space monkeys,” begins to distance himself from his alter ego, and, as he finally understands that he and Tyler are the same person, actively opposes Tyler in order to regain control over his body and his actions. The showdown of the film finds Jack and Tyler on the top floor of a skyscraper with “front row seats to this Theater of Mass Destruction” (00:02:23) that Tyler is orchestrating. Tyler’s “space monkeys” have previously infiltrated key positions in the security services, the police force, the fire department, the cleaning crews, and other infrastructural nodes of the urban sprawl and evacuated the buildings that are about to go down. In a culmination of their homoerotic relationship Tyler puts a gun – the most conventional substitute phallus in American cinema – into Jack’s mouth, threatening to kill him if Jack continues to resist. Eventually, Jack understands that he himself is actually holding the gun, pointing it at himself, about to commit suicide. The camera reveals that Jack is indeed alone and thus transforms the homoerotic significance of the gesture once again into the autoerotic masochism that was the external reality of the relationship between Jack and Tyler. Jack then ‘fakes’ a suicide by shooting himself through the cheek in order to ‘kill’ Tyler. The part of himself who is Tyler seems to believe that Jack has committed suicide, and Tyler drops dead as Jack reasserts his agency.

With regard to the crisis of masculinity depicted in Fight Club, this finale remains ambivalent. Although within the narrative of the movie, Jack has defeated Tyler, hence suggesting that Tyler’s violent mode of masculinity has been overcome (albeit through an act of masochistic violence), Tyler’s “space monkeys” still take Jack for Tyler as there are no external changes to mark the transformation besides yet another self-inflicted injury on Jack’s body. Although Tyler disappears from Jack’s subjective reality, the outside world does not take notice of this victory as Tyler’s minions continue to obey Jack. Instead of catharsis, the fake murder-suicide of Tyler is the culmination of Tyler’s strategy of the hyperreal, since it simulates death, the “ultimate signified” in Baudrillard’s theory. According to Baudrillard, “every form of power, every situation speaks of itself by denial, in order to attempt to escape, by simulation of death, its real agony” (1993: 357). Tyler’s death stabilizes the system that he had previously implemented by removing its original referent from the equation, immortalizing him as a detached signifier that is bound to outlive Jack’s body; after all, “the age of simulation […] begins with the liquidation of all referentials” (ibid. 343). Pettus hence argues that “Tyler’s narrative continues to reproduce itself despite the absence of its original reference”
and that “Project Mayhem succeeds not only in reproducing itself, but also in reproducing the dominant system it opposes” (125). However, Pettus, who refers to Palahniuk’s novel, believes that Fight Club’s narrative fails to recognize the contradiction it has created. Using Herbert Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man (1964) as the basis for his reading, Pettus concludes “that dominant systems maintain hegemony through assimilative inclusion of opposing forces, thus instituting a totality of experience in that it allows only itself as a reference” (111). Like Giroux, Pettus sees Fight Club as a critique of late-capitalist consumerism that unwittingly reproduces the ideology it criticizes and that cannot transcend the one-dimensional universe of consumerism. In this interpretation, Fight Club principally offers the same degree of critique as the Dodge ad that announces a systemic crisis of masculinity which can nevertheless be overcome with the help of a systemic solution (buying a car, and reviving a nostalgic concept of male gender identity, respectively).

While I agree with Pettus and Giroux that Fight Club does not offer a solution to the crisis conditions it identifies, I nevertheless suggest that the film enables a discourse about the alleged crisis of masculinity by emphasizing its own constructedness and thus implicitly marking Jack’s problems and Tyler’s solution as cultural performances. The distinct and highly stylized aesthetics of the film caught the attention of many critics who praised Finch-er’s visual virtuosity but often condemned the film’s excessive depiction of violence (cf. S. Clark 412f). With its jump-cuts and its dizzying tracking shots that allow the camera to move through walls or into the brain of its protagonist (the title sequence retraces bio-electric impulses traveling across the synapses of Jack’s brain), with its extensive use of post-production filters and digital images, as well as with its deliberate insertion of stutters, projection errors, and cue marks into the film, Fight Club’s aesthetic perpetually hovers between agitprop alienation effects and a glorified music video hysteria, between a challenge to the dominant system and its self-indulgent celebration. Formally, Fight Club depicts a world in which authenticity is no longer a possibility, in which rapid sequences of signifiers gloss over any incoherence and contradiction.

In the last moments of the film Marla, who has been captured by a group of “space monkeys,” is about to confront Jack, but as soon as she sees the bleeding hole in his cheek, her anger is deflated and she starts dressing his wound in an almost maternal fashion. Jack apologetically tells her that she has “met [him] at a very strange time in [his] life” (02:10:46), takes her hand and in this moment the explosives go off, bringing down a number of skyscrapers in synchronized detonations as Marla and Jack observe the scene from the safe distance of a picture-window. Fight Club thus ends with the paradoxical image of the symbolic destruction of the architectural phalluses of consumerist capitalism (shown from Marla’s and Jack’s perspective as if it were a movie) and the simultaneous restoration of a heteronormative order as Jack and Marla are ‘reunited’ after the death of Tyler. Babylonic (the falling towers) and prelapsarian (the heteronormative core-unit restored) motifs overlap with each other, and the movie seems to end in this confusion of
symbolism that indeed suggests an aporetic universe in which cause and effect, oppositions and dominance collapse into each other. Before the credits start to roll, the film slows down noticeably, allowing a brief glimpse at the amateurishly inserted frame of a penis as the last image to be seen before the screen goes dark. Ta reads this final frame as the symbolic reclamation of the phallic order:

The film up to this point has indeed provided a sophisticated and critical diagnosis of male disillusionment, but at the end, heteronormative and phallic power are once again reinforced. While the crumbling of the phallic-shaped skyscrapers might imply that corporations and consumerism, as they have been erected by men, need to be the new enemies to take down in the battle for masculinity, the reinsertion of the penis at the very end suggests that the phallus, the heteronormative phallus, will continue to overwrite any meaningful gender relations (275-76).

This reading is certainly compelling but fails to acknowledge that this specific image of a penis has already been intrinsically contextualized in the movie: it is the same frame Tyler splices into the reels of Hollywood blockbuster films as an act of subliminal resistance. The *myse en abyme* thus created – i.e. *Fight Club* exposes itself as a product of the very same system that its protagonist sets out to eradicate in his search for 'authentic' masculinity – establishes a correlation between the crisis of the male subject and its cinematic representation. Rather than reinforcing heteronormative phallic power, the final image de-normalizes this power, marking the unmarked case, and presenting it as a signifier whose signified is absent.

Both the novel and the movie *Fight Club* are very much aware of the paradoxes generated by Tyler’s agenda and formalistically criticize what the narrative – which, after all, is a first-person account told by a schizophrenic man – asserts. This awareness is most vividly articulated via the symbol of soap that serves as a leitmotif in *Fight Club*. Besides branding his disciples with chemical burns, Tyler also uses lye to manufacture soap, introducing himself as a travelling soap salesman when Jack ‘meets’ him for the first time. *Fight Club*, like Richard Powers’s novel *Gain* (1998), deploys soap as a metaphor for the aporetic nature of consumerist and anti-consumerist discourses: traditionally, soap is made from waste animal fat (in one of the film’s more unsavory moments, Tyler and Jack break into a clinic and steal the excess fat from liposuctions for their soap-making, thus “selling rich women their own fat asses back to them” [01:01:40]), but once the chemical conversion is completed, waste fat is transformed into a symbol for cleanliness. In *Gain*, Powers therefore writes that soap stands as “a Janus-faced intermediary between seeming incompatibles, an interlocutor that managed to coax mutually hostile materials onto speaking terms” (46). The aporetic nature of soap as a “Janus-faced intermediary” between binary opposites is furthermore underlined by the fact that Tyler utilizes soap in order to make explosives: “If you were to add nitric acid to the soap-making process, one would get nitroglycerin. With enough soap, one could blow up just about anything” (00:59:10). According to Tyler, soap is therefore both “the yardstick of civilization” (00:22:30) and the means by which civilization can be destroyed.
In *Fight Club*, the metaphorical potential of soap can certainly be applied to the relationship between Jack and Tyler, who represent diametrical versions of masculinity that are ultimately revealed to exist in a single body, but it also indicates that cause and effect, problem and solution, the status quo and crisis are no clear cut categories in the world of *Fight Club*. Like the platonic *pharmakon* as read by Derrida, soap signifies the inherent aporia of Tyler’s discourse which reproduces structural aspects of consumerism. Tyler recurrently claims that the alleged crisis of hegemonic masculinity at the beginning of the millennium can only be resolved through an apocalyptic reboot of society, because “[o]nly after disaster can we be resurrected” (Palahniuk 70). However, Tyler’s scheme to reconstruct society according to a nostalgic template of essentialist gender roles after the cathartic purge attests to his inability to conceive a system outside of the very same parameters he intends to shatter. In an analogous fashion, the movie *Fight Club* simultaneously criticizes the hyperreality of consumerism while implicitly undermining Tyler’s regressive strategy of resistance. In this regard, *Fight Club* adopts a schizophrenic position that mirrors the predicament of its protagonist. The fact that the movie closes with the free-floating signifier of a remediated phallus while the reunited heteronormative couple witnesses the collapse of yet another symbol of the phallic order, demonstrates that in *Fight Club*, the representation of crisis culminates in a crisis of representation.
Works Cited


