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Masculinity in 1990's Post-Cold War American Thriller Films

John Ferguson
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Introduction

While the 1990's marked a period of relative peace and tranquility in the United States, a re-emergence of the crisis of masculinity heavily influenced films during this time. Many of the decade's most critically-acclaimed films, including *Fight Club, Se7en,* and *In the Line of Fire,* dealt with themes of powerlessness that men felt toward large institutions like the government, military, and media. This monotonous middle-class male struggle was highlighted in a way that was otherwise mostly ignored in the mega-action films of the 1980's. Focusing specifically on intense films of the thriller genre, I set out to analyze these new representations of masculinity and suggest why these visions of masculinity became prevalent during this time.
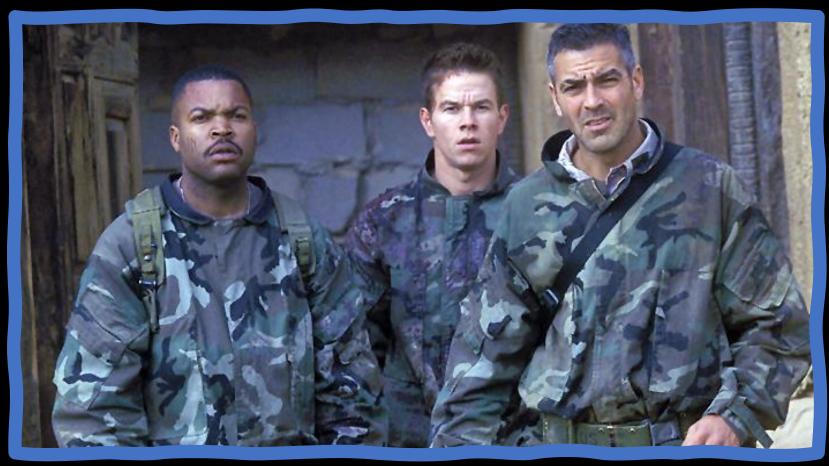
Methods

- Analyzed masculinity in thriller films from the 1990's
- Read and interpreted related academic literature
- Compared critical film reviews
- Discussed my personal opinions, along with those of experts, to generate conclusions

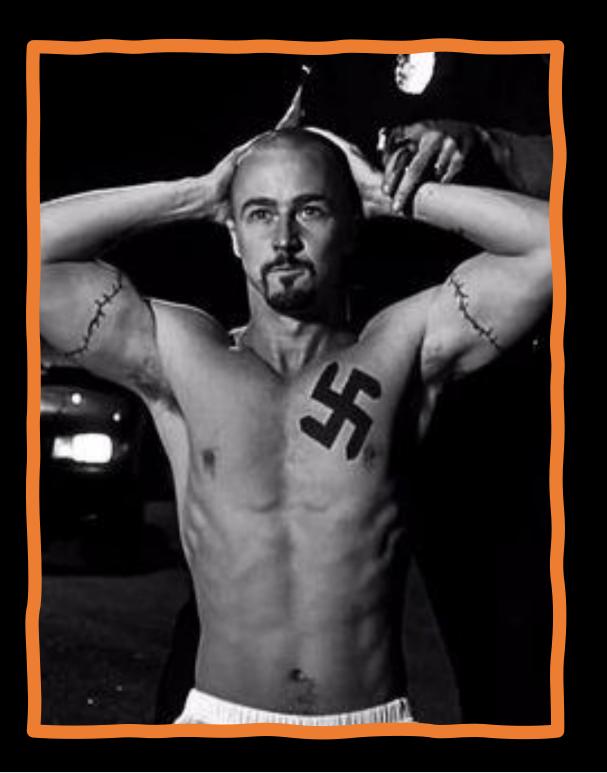Brad Pitt exudes nihilistic masculinity as Tyler Durden in *Fight Club* (1999)

Ice Cube, Mark Wahlberg, and George Clooney defy orders by helping Iraqi rebels safely cross the border to Iran in *Three Kings* (1999)

Clint Eastwood must outsmart a deranged ex-CIA agent to prevent a presidential assassination in *In the Line of Fire* (1993)

Michael Douglas' "D-Fens" violently lashes out against the wrongs he sees in society on his way home from work in *Falling Down* (1993)

Edward Norton plays a reformed neo-Nazi who discourages his younger brother from making the mistakes he did in *American History X* (1998)

Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman track a serial killer who commits crimes inspired by the seven deadly sins in *Se7en* (1995)

Conclusions

With many of the decade's finest pieces depicting common ideas of masculinity as under attack from a changing world, the crisis of masculinity was at the forefront of the motion picture industry in the 1990's. Ranging from the psychological genre to murder-mysteries to white-collar office dramas, thriller films during this time period consistently called into question what it meant to be a man. Further, the theme of rebellion against the established order was frequently presented as the best solution for the common man to regain this "lost" societal power. Whether it was a cubicle office worker quitting his nine-to-five desk job to find greater satisfaction or a government agent ignoring the commands of his superior to do what he felt needed to be done, the thriller films of the nineties routinely portrayed masculinity as a trait that the relatable average man had to reclaim by taking matters into his own hands.

Works Cited

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