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SUBVERSION, DEMYSTIFICATION, AND HEGEMONY:
FIGHT CLUB AS A POSTMODERN CULTURAL TEXT

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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ABSTRACT

This thesis questions whether the film *Fight Club*, as a postmodern text, reaches a rhetorical goal of critical subversion, and if so, how does it reach this goal? Using a method of postmodern critical theory, this thesis argues that *Fight Club* does reach a goal of critical subversion by parodically installing and subverting modern hegemonic assumptions and challenging hegemonic cultural practices.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

A rapid change in technology, consumerism and political economy, coupled with a dissatisfaction with the objective critiques of modernism has led to the cultural philosophy of postmodernism. Woods (1999) recognizes that “the postmodern is understandably widely associated with societies in which consumer lifestyles and mass consumption dominate the lives of citizens” (p. 64). Postmodernism’s philosophical questioning of modernism and hegemonic representations have led to the development of a new range of rhetorical strategies and aesthetic practices that seek to subvert the meta-narratives and foundational ideologies that pervade western society. Woods (1999) identifies several of these strategies and aesthetic practices noting particularly the use the irony, pastiche, intertextuality, and self-reflexivity Linda Hutcheon (1988) also identifies parody as being an important strategy in postmodern texts.

For Best and Kellner (1997) postmodern rhetorical strategies are inherently subversive. They identify postmodernism as a form of resistance rhetoric in opposition to the morals of materialistic, consumer society. “Oppositional postmodernism seeks new forms of resistance, struggle, and social change” (p. 27). For Woods (1999) postmodernism is identified with “fiction that reflects the social ethos of late capitalism” (p. 211). Within this oppositional framework, postmodern rhetorical strategies have had a significant influence on all types of art, including film.

Fight Club, the key text for analysis in this essay, I take to be an exemplary postmodern text that employs postmodern rhetorical strategies and aesthetic practices, which call into question the predominant materialistic ideology of American culture, in a period that Fredrick Jameson (1991) calls late capitalism. In this thesis, I consider the following questions: does *Fight Club*, as an exemplary postmodern text, accomplish the critical subversion of hegemony, or does it reinforce the hegemonic processes that it seeks to subvert? And, if it does in fact accomplish its subversive goals, how it does so? In order to critique hegemony, postmodern texts endeavor to expose how hegemony is textually inscribed. And in that exposure is the demystification of hegemonic rhetorical strategies.

Fight Club offers exceptional insight into the postmodern aesthetic and illustrates the powerful rhetorical potential of postmodernism. The rhetoric of *Fight Club* is highly political and challenges the ideological superiority that has come to dominate American culture. *Sight and Sound* magazine celebrates *Fight Club* stating that “the film disrupts narrative sequencing and expresses some pretty subversive, right-on-the-zeitgeist ideas about masculinity and our name-brand, bottom-line-society ideas you’re unlikely to find so openly broadcast in any other Hollywood movie” (Taubin, 1999, p. 68).

Fight Club is the story of Jack, a thirty-something, white-collar insomniac who fills the hole where his soul should be with items from IKEA. Jack travels the country investigating accidents for a major car company. After determining whether or not the cause of an accident is due to faulty construction, Jack then applies the “formula” (the calculation used to decide what would be less costly for the company, a recall or

settling the wrongful death claims that would result from the ensuing accidents). If it is cheaper to settle the lawsuits, no recall is initiated.

Jack is a corporate soldier, wearing an Armani uniform and living a catatonic existence. Night after night, Jack cleans his condo in place of sleep. His insomnia eventually leads him to find weekly catharsis in a testicular cancer support group. Jack cries with other men who all believe that he too has testicular cancer. This serves as a sedative and Jack is once again able sleep.

However, Jack's sleep is again interrupted by Marla Singer, the chain smoking, rag doll who shares with Jack the secret that neither of them is really sick. However, Jack doesn't need the support group any longer. He has found Tyler Durden.

Tyler is everything that Jack wants to be, completely emancipated from the materialistic world, which has crippled Jack. Tyler is liberated and wants to help Jack be liberated too. Together they create a new kind of cathartic support group – Fight Club.

Jack and Tyler's fight club becomes the ultimate antidote for male emasculation in the 1990's. It is through fight club that Jack, Tyler, and their followers rediscover that from which they have become disconnected – a place for physicality, emotional release and self-reality. However, Jack soon finds that fight club is a product of his own schizophrenia and fractured cardboard life. Marla Singer becomes Jack's only salvation. *Fight Club* is a postmodern narrative about a postmodern existence.

Jack's schizophrenia in *Fight Club* parallels the fractured nature of postmodernism. Indeed, postmodernism has produced countless discussions, several

critics and multiple meanings. This fragmented nature is recognized by Waugh (1993) when she writes that it is “evident that just as there were many postmodernisms, so must there be a variety of theoretical precursors and historical trajectories” (p. 1). Waugh goes on to state that “Though there are many forms of postmodernism, they all express the sense that our inherited forms of knowledge and representation are undergoing some fundamental shift . . .” (p. 5). Both Waugh (1993) and Hutcheon (1988) recognize the contradictions inherent in postmodernism. And although inherent contradictions may very well be a cause of the fragmented nature of the postmodern discussion, they are also an important and defining feature. Waugh states that “it is already apparent that any attempt to ‘map’ the postmodern will encounter endless contradictions” (p. 9). Hutcheon suggests “that, in its very contradictions, postmodernist art might be able to dramatize and even provoke change from within” (p. 7). This fragmented nature that is at the heart of postmodernism supports the question that this thesis explores. Does this fragmented nature mean endless chaos, or can a postmodern text achieve the critical goals of resistance and change? Are critical postmodern texts doomed to reinforce the processes that they seek to resist so that the critical resistance of hegemony through its installation ultimately subverts postmodernism as a critical theory, which itself collapses in a doubly-ironic solipsism, cynicism or pastiche?

This thesis will be composed of four chapters: Chapter One is a discussion of postmodernism and its use as a critical method for reading a text and identifies its particular aesthetic practices and rhetorical strategies; Chapter Two is a description of the film *Fight Club*; Chapter Three is an analysis, interpretation and deconstruction of

the film *Fight Club*; and Chapter Four, the conclusion, which considers the critical potential and limitations of *Fight Club* and its broader implications for postmodern subversive rhetorical strategies in the film.

Justification for the Significance of the Study

There is a fundamental, albeit gradual, shift in our meaning-making processes and modes of representation that is increasing as a result of changes in culture (Waugh, 1993). This cultural shift and its corresponding dissatisfactions are represented and brought into a stark light by postmodern aesthetic practices. Understanding postmodernism and the way that it functions to deconstruct a text from within is a vital tool for revealing ideological assumptions. Accordingly, postmodernism becomes a powerful lens through which to view culture and society.

Postmodernism offers a dichotomy for its use. First, postmodern aesthetic practices and rhetorical strategies can be used to create a subversive cultural text. Postmodernism as an aesthetic form is powerfully rhetorical because of its innate element of ironic resistance. Rhetorically, the postmodern perspective leads to texts that are sharply political, and purposefully subversive of positions of ideological superiority (Hutcheon, 1988).

The second use of the postmodern perspective is as a critical tool for examining a text. By applying the postmodern perspective as a tool for analysis, a critic can identify a text as employing postmodern aesthetic practices and postmodern rhetorical strategies; or analyze a film outside the postmodern aesthetic and deconstruct its underlying assumptions and ideologies. As a tool for analysis,

postmodernism is part of the broad tradition of critical theory which utilizes critique as a method of investigation (McCarthy, 1991). Sonja Foss (1996) identifies postmodernism as a form of ideological criticism. Foss expounds the potential of postmodernism as a form of critical theory and its potential to reveal ideological presumptions when she states:

Postmodernism theories are based on the notion that our culture has moved into a new phase – one that follows the period of Modernism, which championed reason as the source of progress in society and privileged the foundation of systematic knowledge. The new form of society has been transformed radically by the domination of the media and technology, which have introduced new forms of communication and representation into contemporary life. The postmodern society requires new concepts and theories to address the features that characterize the new era: fragmentation of individuals and communities, a consumer lifestyle, a sense of alienation, destabilization of unifying discourses and principles. The postmodern project is useful to ideological critics in that it provides information about the context for many contemporary artifacts and suggests the exigence to which many of these artifacts and their ideologies are responding (Foss, 1996, p. 293).

Foss goes on to state the “when an ideology becomes hegemonic in a culture, certain interests or groups are served by it more than others – it represents the perspective of some groups more than others. The hegemonic ideology represents experience in ways that support the interests of those with more power” (p. 294).

Postmodernism allows an artist or critic to subvert and challenge the hegemonic

ideologies in society. Postmodernism allows a critic to reveal and react to the ideologies that are inscribed within a text, or challenged by a text. Therefore, the ultimate aim of a critic using postmodernism as a tool for ideological criticism “is the emancipation of human potential that is being thwarted by an existing ideology or ideologies” (Foss, 1996, p. 296).

Fight Club is a film that captures much of the debate and rhetoric of postmodernism. It is a quintessential postmodern aesthetic text, clearly utilizing and illustrating postmodern aesthetic practices and rhetorical strategies. *Fight Club* represents an emerging genre of socially satirical postmodern film with the potential to have an impact on the social realities of audiences.

Literature Review

Scholars of many disciplines have written on the subject of postmodernism. Moreover, the discussion is not limited to the United States and has caught the attention of scholars abroad as well, many from countries that share a similar cultural character. Discussions on the theoretical implications of postmodernism cover a wide spectrum from art to geography, from poetry to politics. A full review of all texts on the issue would require volumes. As such, I will review the important literature that has an impact on this thesis. Specifically, the basis of postmodernism as a critical philosophy and method, the postmodern critique of consumerism, postmodernism’s particular capacity for resistance and subversion, and postmodernism in film.

A clear chronology of postmodernism is non-existent, and any claim of such is readily debated, as Best & Kellner (1997) recognize: “In the realm of philosophy and

social theory, there are many different paths to turn from the modern to the postmodern, representing a complex genealogy of diverse and often divergent trails, as the postmodern in turn winds and twists through different disciplines and cultural terrains” (p. 27). However, despite the lack of a definitive foundational history (nor the need for one) Best and Kellner (1997) describe a solid philosophical foundation and identify important theorists in the development of postmodernism. Best and Kellner argue that:

[d]efining the features of what has been identified as postmodernity in recent decades began emerging in the 19th century and that therefore the postmodern turn in society and cultural represents a radicalization and an intensification of the modern that generates genuinely novel social and cultural phenomena to which the term “postmodern” has been applied (p. 44).

The social and cultural phenomena to which Best and Kellner refer are the result of a gradual shift resulting in a new cultural epoch. The fundamental changes in culture are reflected in cultural texts, either reinforcing the dominate ideologies or criticizing them. As such, postmodernism is a descriptive and analytical term (Woods 1999).

The key theorists, identified by Best and Kellner, which first postulated postmodernism are the existential philosophers Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Nietzsche.

Kierkegaard is generally considered the first to begin formulating the notion of postmodernism with his criticism and rejection of modernism. The rejection of modernism would later be embraced by other theorists and become a defining characteristic of postmodernism. Best and Kellner (1997) point out that although

enlightenment values such as liberalism, democracy and reason are still to be considered important, they go on to state that:

The Cartesian position that reason is the ‘essential sustance’ of human life, that it can have absolute knowledge of reality, and that its purpose is to dispel ambiguity and unclarity, replacing them with transparency of logic and truth – as a grossly inadequate position that fails to acknowledge the dark side of reason, its repressed and passionate dimension, as well as its limitations and socio-historical rootedness (p. 7).

Kierkegaard’s shift toward postmodernism began with his distrust of the press. Referring to the press as a “vicious attack dog,” Kierkegaard was one of the first to see that the press is a mass medium that addresses audiences as members of a crowd and that itself helps “massify society” (Best and Kellner, 1997, p. 43). Kierkegaard recognizes that the press represents a shift away from the smaller community toward a mass society. Furthermore, such a change in the fundamental nature of society is apt to prompt a movement toward a materialistic culture. Best and Kellner (1997) point to Kierkegaard’s recognition of the commodification of the press:

Verging on a materialistic perspective, Kierkegaard also understood the press as a monopoly power under the control of capital: “A newspaper’s first concern had to be circulation; from the rule for what it publishes can be: the witness and entertainment without any relation to [genuine] communication. Kierkegaard interpreted this economic determination in terms of the form and content of “information,” now a salable commodity, and describing its leveling

effects on the individual, who consumes it for entertainment rather than information value (p. 44).

As such, Kierkegaard understood why the “press delights in scandal and in inflating trivialities into significant events, thus obscuring and ignoring more important and significant issues – much as it continues to do today” (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 44-45). To Kierkegaard the press was the first sign of postmodernism. His notions of mass society and commodification, coupled with his belief in the subjectivity of truth and the fact that he “systematically champions passion over reason” (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 49), makes Kierkegaard one of the precursors to postmodernism.

Nietzsche also had a great influence on the work of later postmodern theorists. Best and Kellner (1997) summarize Nietzsche’s legacy and complex nature:

Nietzsche’s legacy is highly complex and contradictory, and in retrospect he is one of the most important and provocative figures in the transition from modern to postmodern thought. His assault on Western rationalism profoundly influences Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, and other postmodern theorists, leading many to break with modern theory and to seek alternative theories. Nietzsche himself, however, combines modern, premodern, and postmodern motifs. Some of Nietzsche’s positions, such as the theory of perspectivism that we just elucidated, are arguably modern concepts that take its motifs to higher levels but which pave the way for later ruptures with modern theory (p. 47).

Despite Nietzsche’s complexity, many of his ideas were very much postmodern. His notion of a “multiperspectival discipline,” which viewed any subject

of study through several different lens, rejected the belief of a superior science, method, approach or position (Best & Kellner, 1997). Rather, “from this multidisciplinary space, the notion of *perspectival* interpretation gives Nietzsche a powerful weapon with which to criticize the one-sidedness and reductionism of many forms of modern theory” (Best & Kellner, 1997).

Nietzsche’s skepticism of a preferred, knowing position, expands into his mistrust of meta-narratives, such as Christianity and capitalism. Nietzsche believed that Christianity deprived people of “vital life energies and inimical individuality” (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 59). Christianity’s unequivocal belief in a moral superiority, which is the cornerstone of much of the religion regardless of faction, was flatly rejected by Nietzsche.

Nietzsche reasoned the same way about capitalism. According to Best & Kellner (1997) Nietzsche “loathed what he saw as capitalism’s base concern for merely monetary and bourgeois values, its alienated labor, and its tendency to turn everyone into industrious ants” (p. 60).

Nietzsche’s rejection of positions of epistemological superiority would become an important part of postmodern theory. Later, when Lyotard announced the rejection of the grand narrative, it was an echo of Nietzsche’s position (Best & Kellner, 1997).

Although much of what Nietzsche criticized was what he believed to be modern cultural tendencies, in fact, he was criticizing postmodern tendencies. Nietzsche saw cultural tendencies that were taking place in the gray cultural area between modernism and postmodernism. Nietzsche’s theories were developed in the

shift of modernism and postmodernism. Best and Kellner place Nietzsche's views in perspective:

Nietzsche believed that modern society had become so chaotic, fragmented, and devoid of "creative force" that it had lost the resources to create a vital culture and that ultimately, modern society greatly advanced the decline of the human species that had already begun early in Western history. In Nietzsche's view, two trends were evident that were producing contradictory processes of massification and fragmentation – whose extreme consequences would be a central theme of postmodern theory. On the one hand, modern society was fragmenting into warring groups, factions, and individuals without any overriding purpose or shared goals. On the other hand, it was leveling individuals into a herd, bereft of individuality, spontaneity, passion, or creativity. Both trends were harmful to the development of the sort of free, creative, and strong individuality championed by Nietzsche, and he was sharply critical of each (Best & Kellner, 1997, p. 57).

Nietzsche's legacy and influence on postmodern theory is profound. He laid the foundation for much of postmodern theory today and influenced several other important theorists, including Heidegger.

"Heidegger combines Nietzsche's radical critique of modernity with a nostalgia for premodern social forms and a hatred of modern technology, which he sees as producing new forms of domination" (Best & Kellner, 1997 p. 74). Heidegger's main criticism was leveled at technology. Best and Kellner state that for Heidegger "the critical focus shifts from the existential structure of individual existence and modern

society, to modern technology, which produces a *Gestell*, a conceptual framework that reduces nature, human beings, and objects to a 'standing reserve', as resources for technical exploitation" (Best & Kellner, 1997 p.74).

A review of the work of Kirkegarrrd, Nietzsche and Heidegger lay a fundamental foundation of postmodern theory. A key element of these, as already discussed, is the rejection of cultural meta-narratives based on a false sense of objective, epistomological superiority. The criticism of meta-narratives is a fundamental feature of postmodernism and it is a criticism that is often a major thematic feature of any critical discussion of postmodernism as well as postmodern aesthetic texts.

Capitalism is a grand narrative that is very often challenged by postmodern texts. Kirkegarrrd, Nietzsche and Heidegger are all highly critical of consumerism and rampant capitalism. However, one work that is near canonic that speaks to the idea of capitalism is Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. To Jameson postmodernism is intrinsically tied to economics, particularly capitalism. Walsh (1990) comments that "Jameson proposes that postmodernism is the third great cultural transformation within the history of capitalism, corresponding to . . . the third industrial revolution, that of the computer." Jameson notes: "postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination. The underside of culture is blood, torture, death and terror" (p. 5). Jameson's belief in Marxism surely fuels his attack on the American military – industrial complex. Jameson's postmodern America is a post-industrial, consumer, media driven, information technology based society; a

society that is based on rampant capitalism and the commodification of everything, which has lead to mass culture, even within art.

Jameson has been criticized for using postmodernism to attack American capitalism in arguing in favor of a Marxist critique (Jameson, 1991). One could easily undertake a postmodern assault on Marxism, as Marxism is also a grand narrative. Marxism may in method be diametrically opposed to capitalism, however its position of sociological and philosophical superiority mirrors that of capitalism and its political economic superstructure. Marxism has itself brought eras of blood, torture, death and terror. It would be a mistake to situate postmodernism in any specific economic camp.

As postmodernism is primarily a language based, skeptical, anti-epistemological philosophy of the West, it makes sense that its lens has been directed at capitalism, one of the West's dominant ideologies. Because capitalism is viewed as a dominant ideology in America, American postmodern texts often challenge and deconstruct capitalism and its practices. Despite criticisms and Jameson's other critical motives, his propensity to connect postmodernism and a consumer-based capitalism is well founded. Woods (1999) summarizes the position well:

I say "consumer" deliberately, because popular culture is extricably linked to the commodification of our lives, the commercial exploitation of our leisure time, and the reliance upon a surplus income to indulge these fabricated cultural desires. Everything is commodified and this process is constantly reinforced by a barrage of television advertising. The postmodern is understandably widely associated with societies in which consumer lifestyles and mass consumption dominate the lives of citizens (p. 21).

Thematically, a critical and subversive assault on capitalism is very often a key part of postmodern texts. It is certainly a key theme in *Fight Club*. *Fight Club*, like all postmodern texts, is critical of a grand narrative or position of epistemological superiority; whether capitalism, science, or some other domineering philosophy. The seeds of such a critical approach lay in the postulations of the early postmodern theorists previously discussed.

Postmodern philosophy is one of critical cultural resistance. The resistant nature of postmodernism is reflected in cultural texts and rhetorical strategies and corresponding aesthetic practices which ultimately seek to advocate the postmodern position and have a political purpose. That is to say postmodern texts are indeed purposeful stories.

Patricia Waugh (1993) reinforces postmodernism's narrative nature and states that postmodernism "still carries with it, wherever it goes, the idea of telling stories" (p. 2). Waugh (1993) regards "postmodernism as a theoretical and representational mood, developing over the last twenty years and characterized by an extension of what had previously been purely aesthetic concerns into the demesne of what Kant had called the spheres of the cognitive or scientific and practical moral" (p. 1). By seeing the postmodern as a theoretical and representation mood, Waugh allows us to appropriate the language of postmodernism and use it as a critical tool without complete denunciation of our systems of knowledge and discourse. Thus, Waugh reinforces the efficacy of the postmodern "mood," and underscores a useful vocabulary for considering postmodern aesthetic practices.

Having a narrative nature and being described as a mood, postmodernism takes on the characteristics of other forms of narrative. Many postmodern theorists would have us believe that this is not the case. Some theorists would have us believe postmodernism represents a form of “anti-narrative,” chaotic in nature, and void of all theoretical structuralism. This is simply not the case. Postmodernism is necessarily rhetorical. Subversion, parody and resistance to particular cultural practices require an ideological position. Hence, postmodernism also represents an ideological position.

Like many, Waugh (1993) voices dissatisfaction with modernity and enlightenment representations of knowledge. She rejects the pretense of objectivity and states “there is no position outside of culture from which to view culture” (p. 5). She also recognizes the underlying economic horrors of modernism and underscores that “knowledge and representation are undergoing some fundamental shift: modernity may be coming to an end, strangled by its own logic, or rendered exhausted by economic changes which have propelled us into a new age of information” (p. 5). Waugh recognizes the “strategies of internal disruption; parody, dissensual language games” and “poetic irony” as being part of the postmodern mood (Waugh, 1993, p. 6). Such postmodern aesthetic practices are the fundamental elements of postmodern rhetorical strategies.

Best and Kellner (1997) point out that as an aesthetic practice the postmodern text “seeks new forms of resistance, struggle, and social change” (p. 125). Gone is the modern notion of art for art’s sake. Postmodernism emerges as a mode of resistance to the economic, political, and social manifestations of modernism’s epistemological imperialism. Best and Kellner affirm the notion of postmodern aesthetic practices and

recognize the use of pastiche, irony, and alternative forms of narrative. These aesthetic practices are used to question and rethink the modern claims of objectivity and knowledge articulated often in modern texts (Best & Kellner 1997).

Because the cultural criticism and ideology of postmodernism often points a critical finger at “high art,” postmodernism has been strongly associated with pop culture. Woods (1999) points out that “popular culture has always been established in opposition to the puritan ideology of aesthetic purity and highbrow intellect in modernist culture.” Woods goes on to recognize “that popular culture offers positions from which a politics of cultural resistance may be formed” and that “it is perhaps the theoretical work of Antonio Gramsci which prepared the way for a postmodern conception of culture” (Woods, 1999, p. 135). Woods clearly understands the resistant nature of postmodernism, placing it as the offspring of Gramsci’s theories of hegemony. Woods articulates a position, shared by many postmodern theorists, which identifies pop culture as ideological, politically sharp and rhetorically subversive.

The aesthetic practices of postmodern texts are a reflection of a postmodern mood that has developed in all parts of society. Linda Hutcheon (1988) underscores the inescapably politicalness of the rhetorical strategies of postmodern aesthetic practices, arguing that postmodernism brings “the contradictions of modernism in an explicitly political light” (p. 24). Postmodernism “foregrounds the process of meaning-making in the production and reception of art”(p. 10). Hutcheon also states that “another consequence of this far-reaching postmodern inquiry into the very nature of subjectivity is the frequent challenge to traditional notions of perspective, especially in narrative and painting” (p. 11). Woods points out that “postmodern

fiction is rather an on-going process of problematisation or subversion of realist (mainstream) aesthetic ideology.”

As postmodern philosophy fundamentally challenges existing dominating ideologies, postmodern aesthetic practices challenge conventional storytelling while disrupting our fundamental understanding of cultural practices. McClure and McClure (2001) state that “[P]ostmodern aesthetic practices tend to cast into stark relief the rhetorical pretenses of our meaning-making process” (p. 82). Particular aesthetic features are visible in postmodern cultural narratives. Woods (1999) recognizes several, of what he calls, key characteristics of postmodern film, which includes “a pastiche of other genres and styles, not just imitating their look but alluding to famous scenes or cinematic styles” (p. 211).

Parody is also a key aesthetic practice that is associated with postmodernism. Gottsman (1990) states that “[P]arody . . . opposes dominant metaphors, those social, political, economic, expressive conventions that always threaten to choke off individual creativity and cultural vitality” (p. 1). Several scholars indicate that parody is a key element in postmodern texts. Hutcheon’s work on parody is often cited and Gottesman states that “perhaps the single best source for understanding the potential contribution to film study of a panel on parody is Hutcheon’s, *A Theory of Parody: The Teaching of Twentieth Century Art Forms*. She defines parody as imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways. Gottesman sums up parody as a key component in postmodern film stating:

Film parody had been both an aspect of film’s self-reflexivity and of film’s address to the moral, political, and social world external to itself. From its

beginnings, then, film history reveals in film parody a double record of its consciousness of itself (and other art forms) and of the world in which it is situated. Parodic films have addressed every political, economic, religious, psychological, racial, sociological and conceptual issue of the twentieth century (p. 2).

Parody and irony are not unique to postmodern texts and were strategies used by premodern and modern writers and artists long before there was any postulation of postmodernism. Voltaire makes use of parody in *Candide*, as does Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*. However, to Hutcheon postmodern art forms “share one major contradictory characteristic: they are all overtly historical and unavoidably political, precisely because they are formally parodic” (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 23). Hutcheon further argues that:

[P]ostmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways. Self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 23).

McClure and McClure (2001) consider Hutcheon as well and draw from her in an analysis of *Zelig*, and state that “we seek to expand and develop an understanding of how irony, in the form of antithesis, rhetorically functions enthymematically to subvert the conventions of documentary form” (p. 82). They focus on antithesis as a form of irony used to subvert the conventions of the meaning making process at work in documentary form. McClure and McClure argue that in *Zelig*, postmodern parody

functions in the form of antithesis, and that this “antithesis is subsumed under comparison, in which contrary thoughts meet and whose purposes are embellishment, negation, abridgement, and vividness” (p. 83).

Kinder (1990) states that “[C]haracters function as double agents of the parodic project; rather than unified subjects who invite emotional identification, they are ambivalent signifiers whose meanings slide between the two signifying systems, revealing both the continuity and distance between them” (p. 12). And Perlmutter states that “parody’s primary target, the disruption of accepted social dicta, is accomplished by heteroglossia, an interaction of contending social discourses – the languages, ideologies, and individual speech types that characterize different social classes, occupations, belief systems, and geographic regions.” Clearly ironic parody is a primary part of postmodernism’s subversive strategies.

The subversive strategies of postmodernism exist in several different types of cultural texts. However film not only serves as a powerful medium for subversive postmodernist ideas, but it is itself intimately involved in the postmodern epoch. Friedberg (1995) whimsically illustrates how film is both a cause and product of the postmodern slide. “Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, and offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling” (p. 59).

Hansen (1995) also considers how the production of film and the business of Hollywood have been effected by a continuous advance of the postmodern. Hansen writes:

“Today’s postmodern, globalized culture of consumption has developed a new, and ever more elusive, technologies of power and commodification, to be sure, operating through diversification rather than homogenization: the worldwide manufacture of diversity does anything but automatically translate into a new culture politics of difference. But it has also multiplied the junctures at which such a politics could – and in many places has – come into existence, in particular with alternative practices in film and video” (p. 136-137).

Hansen compares the beginnings of cinema with its current postmodern condition and concludes that “[P]ostmodern media culture seems to be characterized by a similar opening up of new directions and possibilities combined, however with vastly enhanced powers of seduction, manipulation, and destruction” (p. 149).

Film theorists Joanne Hollow and Mark Jancovich (1995) identify postmodernism as a term that “describes both a new aesthetic tradition, first identified in architecture and later self-consciously or unconsciously developed in the other arts (what comes after realism and modernism), and a new socio-cultural logic tied to particular economic structures (what comes after pre-modern and modern societies)” (p. 113). Hollows and Jancovich (1995) describe postmodernism aesthetic practices as a product of a “radical shift in American cinema” marked by “a breakdown of classical storytelling conventions, a merger of previous separated genres, a fragmentation of linear narrative, a privileging of spectacle over causality, the odd

juxtaposition of previously distinct emotional tones and aesthetic materials” (p. 114). Accordingly, “Hollywood has entered a period of prolonged and consistent formal experimentation and institutional flux with a media-savvy audience demanding consistent aesthetic novelty and difference. As a result, stylistic changes which might have unfolded over several decades under the studio system have occurred in a matter of a few years in contemporary Hollywood” (p. 114).

Woods sees postmodern film as a “flattening of history, a style which presents the past in the present; or a ‘retro’ cinema, or nostalgia film. Self-reflexivity of technique. A celebration of the collapse between high and low cultural styles and techniques” (Woods, 1999, p. 214).

Film scholars are not the only ones interested in the postmodern aspects of *Fight Club*. Popular press film critics also recognize the postmodern aesthetic practices of *Fight Club*. Janet Maslin, writing for *the New York Times* (1999) describes David Fincher’s *Fight Club* as “visionary and disturbing” with a “subject matter audacious enough to suit his lightning-fast visual sophistication.” Chris Hewitt (1999) describes *Fight Club* as a “subversive, shamefully hilarious take on materialism film, that goes over the edge of good taste. His camera seems to be everywhere, burrowing into garbage cans . . .”. Hewitt points out Fincher’s self-reflexive sense of humor when he points to “scenes that mockingly explain the mechanics of movie projection and in the moment when Norton cracks ‘I’d like to thank the Academy.’”

Robert Butler (1999) refers to *Fight Club* as a “breathtaking bit of cinematic nihilism fueled by anger and irony, unforgiving bleak humor, stylistic slight of hand

and one of the year's most memorable performances" (p. 2). Butler goes on to write that Fincher and screenwriter Uhls have "fashioned a fierce satire about young men emasculated by society and how they develop an outlet for all the untapped testosterone" (p. ?).

And Terry Lawson (1999), writing for the *Detroit Free Press*, writes that Fight Club is a "reaction to a civilization built on credit cards and cell phones, where possession is not just nine-tenths of the law, but the only justification for laws. If I acquire, I exist"(p.3). Lawson applauds Fincher for making a film that makes "the machinery of modern life look like a Lewis Carroll fantasy. We're forever being whisked in and out of radiated rabbit holes and thrown through mirrors of psychic comprehension" (p. 3).

Any review of postmodernism necessitates a consideration of deconstruction. Deconstruction comes out of the work of Derrida (Tyson 1999). Deconstruction allows a critic to strip away the ingrained ideologies found within a text and allows a critic to reveal underlying assumptions within a text. Tyson (1999) reminds us that "language is not a reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather a fluid, ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies program us without our being aware of them" (p. 241). Because meaning is built into our language, deconstruction can "improve our ability to think critically and to see more readily the ways in which our experience is determined by ideologies of which we are unaware" (p. 241). Deconstruction is a part of the postmodern perspective that allows a critic to challenge the epistemological assumptions and ideological superiority found within a text.

Another scholar whose work is important to this thesis is that of Kenneth Burke. Although Burke is not usually considered in a discussion of postmodernism, he provides a rhetorical perspective and thus a meta-theoretical rhetorical perspective that transcends the particular rhetorical strategies deployed by postmodern texts and provides a valuable vantage point for considering the rhetorical implications of the film *Fight Club* (Wess, 1999).

As the elements that have lead to the cultural creation of the notion of postmodernism continue to intensify, a new postmodern film genre has developed with an intensely political rhetoric woven through. *Fight Club* stands to be one of the benchmarks for this emerging genre and an analysis of *Fight Club* allows for a fruitful examination of the rhetorical potentialities and limits of postmodern as a critical theory.

Methodology

Best and Kellner (1997) have argued that “postmodern concepts are primarily conceptual constructs meant to perform certain interpretive or explanatory tasks and are not neutral descriptive terms that define pre-established state of affairs” (p. 24). Accordingly, as a tool for rhetorical criticism “postmodern concepts are generated as theoretical constructs used to interpret a family of phenomena, artifacts, or practices” (p. 24).

Hutcheon (1988) recognizes that a postmodern approach to reading a text must include an analysis of irony and parody. She states “I think the formal and thematic contradictions of postmodern art and theory work to do just that: to call attention to

both what is being contested and what is being offered as a critical response to that, and to do so in a self-aware way that admits its own personality” (p. 13). Hutcheon (1988) tells us that postmodernism is a “contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (p. 3). A postmodern approach must involve an analysis of understanding a critique of hierarchical assumptions by ironically displaying those hierarchies. Hutcheon reminds us that postmodernism doesn’t destroy the assumptions of the past, nor does it claim some form of epistemological superiority, rather it just calls into question those assumptions while understanding it also creates a hierarchy and makes claims of ideology. “All hierarchies are social constructs” (p. 41). Hutcheon also lends a strong sense of parody to a postmodern reading. Hutcheon states that “parody is a perfect postmodern form in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (p. 11).

McClure and McClure (2001), drawing on Hutcheon, refer to parody as the “quintessence of postmodern cultural practices that install and then subvert (often via the deployment of irony) conventional notions of author, narrator, subject position, plot, temporal sequence, representation and subjectivity” (p. 82). This is reinforced by Hutcheon’s statement that “typically postmodern, the text refuses the omniscience and omni of the third person and engages instead in a dialogue between a narrative voice and a projected reader. Its viewpoint is avowedly limited, provisional, personal” (p. 10). This rhetorical view point is in stark contrast with modernist conventions of narrative rooted in the Cartesian subject-object split. Moreover, postmodernism doesn’t seek to establish a “transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a re-evaluation

of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present”(p. 19). Again, “postmodernist contradictory art still installs that order, but it then uses it to demystify our everyday processes of structuring chaos, of imparting or assigning meaning” (p. 7).

Demystification is very nearly synonymous with deconstruction. Postmodernism is a state of deconstructing constructions, or deconstructing ideologies. There is no true meaning to a text, no imbedded objective truth (Derrida 1978). Language is not a stable constant that offers a universal understanding (Derrida 1978). Understanding the fact that language is unstable, and as a result, can install ideologies of which we are occasionally unaware. Deconstruction helps to reveal these ideologies, and to reveal the realist and modern assumptions employed in construction of texts.

As Tyson (199) points out, “for Derrida, the answer is that no concept is beyond the dynamic instability of language, which disseminates (as a flower scatters its seeds on the wind) an infinite number of possible meanings with each written or spoken utterance” (p. 246). Deconstruction then offers us an approach to demystify language as a portal with an infinite number of views.

Tyson states that deconstruction asks such questions as what voices are not being heard or are being subordinated? What is not being said? How is identity destabilized? How do different readings of a text defy the answers and meaning that a text claims it offers? What ideology does the text promote and how does conflicting evidence show the limitations of the ideology?

In conclusion, an analysis of the aesthetic practices and rhetorical strategies of *Fight Club* will consider the inscription of postmodernism and explore *Fight Club*'s potentialities and limits as a critical engagement with the hegemony of realism and modernism.

CHAPTER 2

DESCRIPTION OF THE FILM *FIGHT CLUB*

Fight Club employs cinematic aesthetic practices and unconventional narrative and plot sequencing that are often associated with the postmodern genre of film.

Although the film does not play with narrative sequencing to the extent of other films in the postmodern genre, such as *Pulp Fiction* or *Memento*, it does in fact break from the traditional Hollywood motif utilizing subversive filmic properties. In this chapter I will discuss the plot structure, narration style, intertextual dialogue and visual parody, and cinematic techniques of *Fight Club*.

Conventional by some comparisons, *Fight Club* does employ a plot structure that differs little from the traditional approach of problem/climax/resolution, albeit in a fragmented form. *Fight Club* can be segmented into three parts, each with varying degrees of violence, physicality and identification. The first part of the film takes the viewer through Jack's problem and the creation of Fight Club, and develops the inseparable relationship between Tyler and Jack. The second part of the film has Fight Club mutating beyond its cathartic purpose into something more ominous – Project Mayhem. The second part of the film also develops the tension between Tyler and Jack. The third part of the film centers around the surprising plot twist that reveals Tyler and Jack are the same person, while also obliterating the deceptively close bond that had tied them throughout the film.

It should be noted that even though Jack and Tyler are revealed to be the same person in the film, the following discussion does, by necessity, treat them as two

separate characters, for purposes of analysis. As such, when discussing Tyler Durden, I am referring to the character portrayed by Brad Pitt, and when discussing Jack, I am referring to the character portrayed by Edward Norton. Only occasionally is it necessary to modify this distinction, because there are characters in the film, particularly Marla, who only know a Tyler, which leads to another important distinction. Although the film reveals that Tyler is a figment of Jack's imagination, or more precisely, a part of Jack's psyche, Jack isn't ever identified in the film, nor is the name Jack used as an identity other than when Edward Norton's character is thinking in voice-over. Jack denotes the character portrayed by Edward Norton. However, in the film Tyler Durden is the only identity that the other film's characters know. This becomes clear during the third part of the film when characters refer to Edward Norton as Tyler Durden. These distinctions are important parts of the overall plot of the film, and underscores the incertitude of identity.

Fight Club opens with a roller-coaster camera ride down Jack's brain stem and winds up at the end of a gun barrel that has been inserted into Jack's mouth. After discussing the feeling of the gun barrel in his mouth, Jack decides to take the viewer back in time to the point where the viewer can begin to understand why he winds up in this rather unfortunate position. At this point we are also introduced to the first person narrative that is usually associated with postmodern film. A quick cut takes the viewer back to Jack and his insomnia. The choice of where to land the viewer is an interesting point, as we find Jack in bed fighting with insomnia. Most standard plot structures introduce the viewer to a situation being faced by the main character often just prior to the development of the problem that will eventually have to be addressed

by the characters. *Fight Club* drops the viewer into an already existing situation, augmenting the already fractured narrative structure.

Begging for relief and claiming death is at hand, Jack seeks a doctor's help for his insomnia but finds little sympathy. The doctor refuses to give Jack a narcotic to help him sleep. He tells Jack that he needs natural sleep, and if he thinks he has a problem he should go to a local cancer support group and see what it's like to have real problems.

The scene with Jack and the doctor offers the first use of intertextual cinematic augmentation. While Jack discusses his insomnia with the doctor, a small flash of Brad Pitt appears for a second on the screen and then disappears. There is a similar flash when Jack first attends the cancer support group.

On Jack's first encounter with the cancer support group he meets Bob, the ex-bodybuilder who now has enormous breasts because of hormone therapy. An androgynous figure, with his high pitch voice and breasts, Bob represents the embodiment of male emasculation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Jack opens up and cries on Bob's shoulder and through this catharsis he is once again able to sleep. Personal voice-over narrative continues to guide the viewer through the film. Jack continues going to support groups, the list of groups ever growing, until he attends a support group of one type or another each night. It is at this point in the plot, when Jack is finally at rest. Jack can finally sleep, that is until Marla Singer appears.

Marla Singer, portrayed as the chain-smoking, goth/punk nemesis of Jack, begins showing up at all the same support groups, including his testicular cancer support group. Jack knows immediately that she is a "tourist" and, like him, there for

alternative reasons. For Marla the morbid goings-on at the support group meetings are “cheaper than a movie and the coffee is free.” Because of Marla, Jack again can’t sleep. He confronts Marla, who turns out to be an aggressive, intelligent woman who is not going to cower at Jack’s insinuations. Jack threatens to expose Marla, and in response Marla threatens, both confidently and defiantly, to expose him. They decide to split the various support groups at which both have become regulars. This arrangement ensures that their paths won’t cross. However, Jack asks for her telephone number and she, in a seductively knowing way, writes it on his hand. This flirtatious scene begins developing sexual tensions between Jack and Marla. Although, Jack has had sexual images of Marla in his meditative moments at group meetings, this is the first sign of interpersonal sexual tension.

The first part of *Fight Club* establishes Jack’s corporate identity. As a recall coordinator for a major car company, Jack flies from place to place making determinations based on cost/benefit to the company. Jack discusses his corporate life in the usual, semi-melodic tone of the first person narrative. As he discusses his work with another passenger on a flight bound for another investigation, the viewer gets a glimpse of suicidal wishes from Jack, as he explains how he occasionally hopes for a mid-air collision. But in an interesting ironic twist, he doesn’t want to die to be released from his tormented life, rather he wants to die because life insurance pays triple if killed on a business trip. It is the ultimate postmodern epitaph.

Jack’s narration also introduces us to the clean, white, prepackaged, single-serving world of the traveling corporate soldier. The mise-en-scene that Fincher uses when showing Jack’s corporate world is significantly different than the mise-en-scene

he uses when Jack is with Tyler. Dark, vampire-like visions dominate when Tyler and Jack are together, including scenes during *Fight Club*. Dark, half-lit rooms, urban decay, sickly neon glows all spin around Tyler and Jack. In contrast, Jack's button down world is clean, crisp and tends to be very light and bright.

Jack and Tyler first meet on one of Jack's business trips. The viewer immediately gets a heavy dose of Tyler and his philosophy; a philosophy that mirrors that of the postmodernists. Tyler discusses the illusion of safety on an airplane, and offers an alternative reason for having oxygen drop down in case of emergency, because it gives passengers a euphoric feeling before death. Tyler is friendly but direct. When Jack asks what he does for a living, Tyler immediately subverts the usual business discourse by asking Jack directly "Why? So you can pretend that you care." Tyler eventually discloses to Jack that he sells soap for a living. He takes out his brief case and gives Jack a card. Jack notices that Tyler has the exact same brief case as he, and comments on that fact.

The matching brief case scene is the first of several points in the film that Fincher gives small hints to the ultimate plot twist that is revealed later in the film. Such rhetorical tricks allow for a different viewing of the film a second time. On a second viewing, rather than just a repeat of the film with the only difference being the viewer knows how the story ends, the viewer finds different readings of the film when discovering these encoded tricks of the filmmaker. The recent film *The Sixth Sense*, also makes use of this subversive technique. Although unlike *The Sixth Sense*, Fincher doesn't recap all his little tidbits for the viewer. Only a second viewing of the film can reveal its secrets. Such a retrospective approach is made easier with the personal

narrative style of postmodern texts, because it offers a narrowed view of past plot events.

After his initial meeting with Tyler, Jack returns home to find his apartment blown to bits, and his furniture strewn around the front of his building. Again in the personal narrative style and with some interesting camera work, Jack explains how such an explosion might have occurred and how the thick walls of the complex, designed for those living in close proximity to those who may be hard of hearing and have to yell, prevented any other apartments from becoming damaged. Jack wanders amongst the remnants of his catalog life, embarrassed by the fact that his refrigerator has only condiments inside for the firemen to find. Not sure what to do, Jack first calls Marla but hangs up without speaking. He then calls Tyler but gets no answer.

Again, Fincher may be employing a glimpse into the film's ultimate plot twist. Jack gets an immediate call back from Tyler who tells him he "stared 69ed him." This may not be possible, or seems somewhat improbable with a pay telephone. Also, as Jack turns as he hears the ring of the telephone, Fincher uses a moving close-up of Jack which seems to indicate a type of disbelief in the ringing telephone. Soon Tyler and Jack are drinking beer and discussing life. Again, the viewer gets a strong dose of Tyler's life philosophy. After outlining his anti-materialist, anti-consumer philosophy, Tyler offers Jack a place to stay. But he asks Jack to first do him a favor. He asks Jack to hit him. Jack and Tyler begin exchanging blows and so begins Fight Club.

After pummeling each other for a while, Tyler introduces Jack to his new home, a run-down, abandoned house. The home is a dark alternative to stark white suburbia, offering nothing more than dirty mattresses, rusty water, and no television.

It is the perfect place for Tyler and Jack. Stripped of all amenities, after the first month Jack doesn't even miss television. Jack mentions that he believed the house was abandoned and that Tyler had moved in as a kind of squatter. The fact that Tyler just moved into the house like an animal moves into a cave, implicitly underscores the anti-materialistic sentiment of the film by representing a home that doesn't involve banks, mortgages or real estate transactions.

At this point in the film, there are two very important plot lines that drive the film. The first is the growth of Fight Club, and the second is the development of a relationship with Marla. Jack and Tyler continue to expand Fight Club and scenes of their fights have more and more on-lookers and eventual participants, until finally Jack and Tyler move Fight Club into the bottom of a club called Lou's. Fight Club now has rules, and "the first rule of Fight Club is you don't talk about Fight Club."

As Fight Club grows, Jack, again in voice-over, states that Fight Club only exists in the hours between when Fight Club starts and when Fight Club ends. He explains that a person while at Fight Club is not the same person as he is in the outside world. That's why if you see someone outside of Fight Club, you can't tell him that he had a good fight because you wouldn't be talking to the same person. This is a clear indication of the schizophrenic personality of Jack and Tyler. Such a statement is an admission by Jack that he is not the same person either. However, in Jack's case the figurative is literal.

Fight Club continues to expand. One night, Jack runs into Bob, from his testicular cancer support group, and learns Bob goes to Fight Club on Tuesday's. The fact that there was a Tuesday Fight Club seemed to surprise Jack. Jack goes to the

Saturday night version. It is during this conversation that the first hint of tension between Jack and Tyler begins to surface. Bob asks if Jack knows that man who started it, he hears he is a great man. Then he asks, "Do you know Tyler Durden?" It's clear that Jack feels a stab of jealousy as Bob strikes a note in Jack's psyche that will continue to play through film.

While *Fight Club* grows, so does a sexual relationship between Marla and Tyler. This relationship also causes a great deal of tension between Jack and Tyler. Jack tells the viewer that he and Tyler are like Ozzie and Harriet, while visually Fincher shows Jack fixing Tyler's tie before leaving the house. The sexual relationship that develops between Marla and Tyler throws Jack and Tyler's relationship into a spin. Marla represents the lynchpin in Jack's psyche. It is through Marla that Fincher reveals Jack's schizophrenia, and in the first part of the film Fincher again offers some glimpses into what would eventually be an extreme plot twist.

Jack discovers that a sexual relationship exists between Tyler and Marla very abruptly. One morning in the kitchen as Jack is drinking morning coffee, he hears what he believes is Tyler coming into the kitchen. Jack starts saying something to who he believes is Tyler, and spins in surprise when he is answered by Marla. Of course to Marla there is no Jack, knowing only the one person named Tyler. Marla's reality is, after all, quite a bit different from Jack's. Marla's presence completely unnerves Jack. After Marla leaves, Tyler comes into the kitchen and explains how he first meets Marla. The story is told as it happened the night before, offering the viewer a momentary temporal displacement. Marla had called Jack after taking too

many pills and was certain she was dying. Jack, not wanting to talk to her, placed the receiver on top of the phone while Marla rattles on. Eventually Tyler picks up the receiver of the telephone. Tyler proceeds to Marla's apartment and convinces her to leave with him to avoid the police who are responding to her suicide call. Back at the house, Tyler has his first sexual encounter with Marla.

Of course, a retrospective view of the film would offer a glimpse into a very surreal relationship that has a profound impact on the plot as well as offering a critical lynchpin to the film. Although, there seems to be an interesting love triangle developing in the film, it is really a dyadic relationship between a schizophrenic character and an odd though rational woman. The viewer does get a glimpse that Marla is at the line between the reality of Jack and the delusion of Tyler. For instance, when Jack first sees Marla in the house his surprise is obvious, but when Jack asks her what she is doing in his house, her surprise equals his. She leaves and Tyler enters. After discussing Marla's wild side, Tyler makes Jack promise that he would never talk to Marla about him and if Jack ever breaks his promise then they, Tyler and Jack, are over. As the first part of the film develops, Marla makes several more visits and they are equally revealing. During one visit, Marla reaches around and touches Jack in a very sexually explicit manner. Again, she is surprised by Jack's action. Upon a second viewing when the ultimate plot is revealed, the fact that Marla is seeing and speaking with *one* person is a testament to Fincher's intellect as a filmmaker.

The strain on Jack and Tyler's relationship that is caused by the sexual relationship between Tyler and Marla also helps create a homoerotic dimension that is evident between Jack and Tyler. The interplay and ambiguity of sexuality and gender

bending in the film is played out to a large degree between Jack and Tyler. References to Ozzie and Harriet, Tyler's use of "couple" dialogue such as "it's over between us," and Tyler's invitation to Jack to join them in the bedroom to "finish Marla off" crosses sexual lines of typical Hollywood relationships. While visiting Marla in her apartment for the first time, Tyler is very playful with a rubber male organ that Marla has on her dresser. Also, later in the film, Tyler kisses Jack's hand, to which Jack's reaction is confused but intrigued. The interplay between Jack, Tyler and Marla is a display of multi-dimensional exploration in identity by Fincher.

It is during the first part of the film that the viewer also discovers that Tyler, as Jack puts it, is the ultimate guerrilla terrorist of the food service industry and a pornographic projectionist, as Jack takes the viewer through the life of Tyler. In an intriguing use of intertextuality and first person narrative, Jack first discusses Tyler as the projectionist who splices pornographic material into family films. As Jack narrates and discusses the job of a projectionist Tyler points to the corner of the screen and points out a "cigarette burn," or the point at which a projectionist knows to switch reels. Fincher combines the story narrative with industry practices and jargon.

Also, as Jack introduces the viewer to Tyler's food service antics, he does so by becoming part of the scene. Jack sits at the table while describing, to the camera, Tyler's job as a bus boy. And Jack has a conversation with Tyler while having a conversation with the viewer. Fincher uses subversive cinematic effects to help illuminate Tyler's subversive life.

The first part of the film continues developing the characters and Fight Club as a cathartic, subversive pass time, until Fincher moves the viewer into the second part

of the film. With a powerful transitional scene, Fincher moves Fight Club and the viewer out of the basement.

The transitional scene starts in the basement of Lou's and another night of Fight Club. Tyler is chastising the group because "by the look of all the new faces, somebody has been breaking the first rule of Fight Club." After growing angry from the snickers, Tyler begins spewing his philosophy until he is interrupted by Lou and his bodyguard. Lou wants to know what is going on in the basement of his club. Tyler explains that they have an understanding with Irv, but Lou doesn't care. Lou wants everybody to get out, but Tyler interrupts and tells Lou that he and his friend should join their club. This infuriates Lou who begins hitting Tyler. But with every strike, Tyler gets more and more sarcastic, and Lou beats him worse, until finally Lou stops, deciding that he has broken Tyler. Then in a flash Tyler has Lou on his back and is spewing blood all over him. Disgusted, Lou "swears on his mother's eyes" that Tyler and crew can continue to use the basement. Lou runs out screaming.

Tyler is then carried Christ-like to the corner of the room. There he gives his first home work assignment. He informs everyone that they are to get into a fight with a stranger and lose. This carries Fight Club out of the basement for the first time and sends it in a new, darker direction.

The second part of the film begins comically, as the members of Fight Club venture out and lose their fights with various strangers, including a priest. But, the action quickly shifts to Jack, sitting in his boss' office telling his boss that "we need to talk." His boss begins going over the various infractions of some employee code of conduct, but Jack has a different idea. He decides to blackmail his boss. Jack asks the

hypothetical question of “what do you think the Department of Transportation would do if they found out that cars roll off the assembly line without proper inspection, and with breaklines that fail at fifteen hundred miles.” Outraged, Jack’s boss fires him. However, Jack has a counter offer, “to be kept on as a paid consultant whose job it is not to tell anyone what he knows about the safety cuts made by the car company. Jack conveys “this is a job I can do at home.”

Further enraged, Jack’s boss picks up the phone to call security, but again Jack has a different idea. He balls his fist, and strikes himself. Stunned, his boss lowers the phone as Jack beats himself around the room, the whole time shouting out as if it were his boss doing the deed. Jack yells, “no please” and “not that” as he cast himself through the air smashing furniture. It is here that Fincher gives the viewer perhaps the biggest clue throughout the film that Tyler and Jack are one in the same. Moreover, Fincher offers this clue in a very deliberate and explicit manner. As Jack strikes himself so hard that he flies through the air, Fincher freezes the frame, and in a voice-over by Jack the viewer hears “for some reason I thought of my first fight – with Tyler.” Fincher appears to enjoy giving the viewer clues to indicate the ultimate plot twist that lay ahead, but never does he give more than a curious hint.

Jack crawls over to his boss, kneeling and bloody he once again makes his offer. But he is interrupted as security officers enter the office and stumbles upon what looks like a boss beating up his employee. A quick cut has Jack bloody but smiling, and in a voice-over the viewer is told that Jack and Tyler now have “corporate sponsorship” and that is how they were able to have Fight Club every night. Jack also lets us know that Tyler is up to something similar, currently engaged

in a class action suit with the hotel that employs him for the high urine content in the hotel's soup. A voice-over by Jack at Fight Club has him repenting "I am Jack's wasted life."

It is during this second part of the film that there is a shift toward a darker tone. Tyler continues to hand out homework, but things have taken a more violent turn. The homework assignments now call for vandalism. Soon the viewer sees computer stores being blown up, the safety instructions on airplanes being replaced by a new version depicting people dying in a flaming crash. A close up follows with a fast pan of several newspaper clippings of the different anti-social acts that the Fight Club members had perpetrated. Next, the viewer sees Tyler and Jack setting the alarms off on various luxury vehicles, such as Mercedes and Porches, while discussing the rumors that Fight Club has begun in other cities and asking each other "did you start that one, no I thought you did." Fight Club is spreading.

Next, Tyler takes Jack into a convenience store and when Jack asks why, Tyler simply states "homework." To Jack's surprise Tyler pulls the convenience store clerk out the back door and places a gun to his head. Tyler then takes the clerk's wallet and informs him that he is going to die. The clerk is, of course, well panicked. Jack is also panicked. He tries to convince Tyler that what he was doing is wrong but Tyler pays little attention. After Tyler finds an expired community college ID card in the clerk's wallet, he begins to question him about it, probing him about the life choices he has made. The clerk reveals that at one time he wanted to be a veterinarian, but there is too much education required. Tyler asks, "would you rather die in the back of a convenience store." Tyler then takes the ID card and tells the clerk that he will be

watching and if he “is not on his way to becoming a veterinarian in six weeks” he’ll be dead. And then Tyler lets the clerk go.

Jack is completely shocked by what had just happened. He begins ranting to Tyler, asking why? Tyler tells Jack how tomorrow will be the greatest day of the clerk’s life. His food will taste better than any before eaten. He will be alive. Tyler tosses the gun to Jack for examination. Jack discovers that the gun isn’t loaded. The clerk was never in any danger. In a voice-over, Jack celebrates Tyler stating “you got to give it to him, he had a plan.”

The scene with the convenience store clerk stands as an important scene in the film. It does not represent a turning point of any kind, But it does confirm Tyler’s philosophy of rhetoric and action. Also, it reinforces the non-malicious nature of Tyler, as he is at this point in the film. Fincher creates some excitement with this scene while maintaining the overall attitude of the film.

Fincher also begins to show a softening of Jack’s attitude toward Marla. In another kitchen meeting Marla ensures Jack that she will be gone soon. Jack, however, says it’s ok, and asks if she has still been going to the group therapy meetings where they first met. Marla tells Jack that Cloe has died. The last time Jack had seen Cloe, she was a skeleton of a women looking for a last sexual experience before she died. Jack momentarily reflects on Cloe. He then asks Marla what she is getting out of “all this.” He also asks “why a weaker person must latch on to a stronger person?” Marla, in rebuttal, asks Jack what he gets out of the relationship and Jack answers back “it’s different with us.” Confused, Marla asks with who? Jack than tries to avoid the conversation, while also questioning the sounds he keeps hearing

from the basement. As he moves to the basement door, Marla harangues him about continuing the conversation. From the basement Tyler is telling Jack what to say, “this conversation is over.” Again Fincher is giving a clue that Tyler and Jack are the same person. And that somehow, Marla is the impetus that may reveal this secret.

Marla leaves frustrated and Jack goes into the basement to confront Tyler, where he finds several bunk beds and soon learns Tyler plans to build an army. Soon Jack also discovers the first applicant standing on the porch. Tyler informs him that the applicant stands for three days without food, water or encouragement. Also, Jack and Tyler continuously harass the applicant. Jack strikes the applicant with a broom while Tyler watches from a window and Jack, in a voice-over revelation, states that “sooner or later we all became what Tyler wanted us to be.”

One by one the applicants are accepted and they then cut their hair and dress only in black. Jack isn't really sure why Tyler is building an army until he comes home one night and finds the troops around the television watching a news report. The report features a burning building with a big smiley face painted on the side. Jack, obviously upset, asks what they had done? The troops all look at each other and then answer, “Sir, the first rule of Project Mayhem is you don't talk about Project Mayhem.” Jack casts a look at Tyler who smiles knowingly and walks away. Fincher then offers the viewer several quick cuts and shots of different vandalisms. He accompanies this with a shot of newspaper clippings with headlines of various crimes. Including one headline with an intertextual parody aimed at Brad Pitt. The headline is a report of several monkeys being freed from a local zoo, an obvious reference to Pitt's role in the apocalyptic film *Twelve Monkeys*.

As Project Mayhem grows, the city police commissioner announces on a television newscast that the vandalism is linked to some underground boxing clubs and that the people responsible will soon be apprehended. Fincher then cuts to an award ceremony of some kind where the police commissioner leaves the table and goes to the men's room. Tyler and his followers, dressed in waiter whites, are lying in wait for the commissioner in the men's room. Jack is also there, however, Fincher has Jack acting unsure, indecisive and clearly subordinated to Tyler. The police commissioner is assaulted; his hands and feet bound, mouth taped, and an elastic wrapped around his testicles by a knife wielding foodservice worker. With a narrow shot of all of them and a close up of Tyler, the scene is set. Tyler tells the commissioner that he better call off the investigation or else he'll be castrated. In another example of Tyler expounding the strong rhetoric of the film, he tells the commissioner "we cook your food, we pick up your garbage, don't fuck with us." The elastic is then cut from the testicles of the police commissioner in a symbolic castration.

As Tyler and his followers flee, Tyler instructs the crew to split up and he directs Jack to go in a different direction than he. Jack is obviously hurt by this and in a voice-over says "I am Jack's feeling of rejection." This feeling of rejection signals the end of the second part of the film and begins the transition into the third and final part of the film with a cut to Jack circling one of the soldiers of Project Mayhem in the familiar basement setting of Fight Club.

Jack beats the soldier mercilessly in one of the most graphic and openly violent scenes in the film. The crowd stands silent as Jack causally gets off the beaten man

and shrugs. Tyler asks Jack “when did you become psycho boy?” Jack replies “I wanted to destroy something beautiful.” Disgusted Tyler leaves giving orders to take the beaten man to the hospital. Then he and Jack exit to a waiting town car that has been plucked from airport parking.

Upon entering the car Tyler wants to know if there is a problem. Jack tells Tyler that he is upset because Fight Club was theirs, they started it together and now it is all Tyler’s. The conversation starts to get heated as Tyler, again preaching the hard line, angrily insists that Fight Club isn’t about them, it is bigger than they are. Jack still insists that he should be in the know. Tyler then barrages Jack with a series of corporate euphemisms: “Do you want me to email you, put it on your item action list?” Tyler lets go of the steering wheel and Jack jumps for it. “Look at you, you’re fucking pathetic,” screeches Tyler. But Jack is focused on the two on-coming trucks. Then Tyler reveals an important plot dynamic when he says “why do you think I blew up your condo? Hitting bottom isn’t a weekend retreat, it’s not a seminar, you need to let go and forget about trying to control everything.”

A cool look comes over Jack’s face as he capitulates. Tyler again releases the steering wheel and after some weaving the car careens off the road and goes over an embankment. Fincher presents the car crash in a dreamy kind of sequence until he picks up speed again and everyone except Jack is climbing out of the car bleeding and injured. Jack is knocked unconscious from the impact.

Cut to another dream like shot where Jack can vaguely see Tyler squatting over him, and he can hear Tyler’s voice talking about a future distopia – a future free of consumerism and capitalism, where people cure venison, and grow corn. When he

wakes, Tyler is gone. He searches for Tyler, calling his name with a kind of questioning tone, but Tyler is not there. Jack's awakening and Tyler's disappearance mark the beginning of the third and final part of the film.

Jack, apparently recovered from the injuries sustained in the car wreck, looks around the house but finds no sign of Tyler. What he does find is a number of files and drivers licenses of Project Mayhem members, a shot designed to indicate the size and scope of Project Mayhem. The files he finds, containing information about various credit card companies that are targets of Project Mayhem, will be very significant as the plot unfolds. As Jack moves through the house he finds it has taken on a life of its own – driven by Project Mayhem. Tyler's army is busy with various activities, including making soap. In a voice-over Jack confesses his belief that Tyler has dumped him, another homoerotic piece of dialogue found in the film. Also in voice-over, Jack offers the viewer a bit of Hollywood suspense, musing "what comes next in Project Mayhem, only Tyler knows."

Jack eventually wanders outside and encounters Marla who comes to the house looking to speak to Tyler (again, it is important to reiterate that to Marla Jack and Tyler are the same person). She asks if she could come in side. Jack responds by telling her that Tyler isn't there. Marla can only offer a confused, "What?" Jack, irritated, starts to respond to Marla condescendingly "Tyler not here, Tyler gone." Marla leaves stunned, completely confused.

Jack returns into the house to find a commotion. Several members of Project Mayhem come running into the house yelling "Someone's been shot! Bob's been shot!" Bob is placed on the table and in a series of quick cuts the other members of

Project Mayhem that were involved explain what had happened. It is revealed that during assignment “Latte Thunder,” in which a piece of modern art and a chain coffeehouse would be destroyed, the police shot Bob in the head. Jack is completely distraught and lashes out at the others. Someone mentions burying Bob quickly. Jack now becomes highly irate. The others remind Jack that if someone is killed in Project Mayhem the body is to be disposed of. Jack angrily addresses the group stating that this is a person and his name is Robert Pulson. Jack is reminded that in Project Mayhem nobody has a name. But again Jack states that the man has a name and it is Robert Pulson. Then a member speaks out, “I understand sir, in death we have a name. His name is Robert Pulson.” Over Jack’s objection the group begins chanting “His name is Robert Pulson!” Jack can no longer take it and starts ranting to himself “I have to find Tyler, I have to find Tyler.” He goes into Tyler’s room and rummages through his belongings, finding plane tickets from all over the country. He sets out to find Tyler.

Jack jets off across the country looking for Tyler. The cinematic techniques used by Fincher correspond to the desperate pace of the plot. Quick cuts of planes taking off and landing, Jack in and out of different airports gives a fast and anxious pace. Fincher uses several voice-overs as the viewer follows Jack on his quest. Fincher also begins to give the viewer more explicit hints toward the ultimate plot twist. The first of which takes place when Jack goes into a bar looking for Tyler. Jack is talking to several people that work in the bar and asks if Tyler had been there. After some prodding, the bar tender finally says “Sorry, I can’t help you sir.” Then the bar tenders winks at Jack.

As Jack continues, he encounters people that speak of Tyler like a god, and one dry-cleaning clerk who struggles to uphold the first rule of Fight Club. Jack sees Fight Clubs in alleys and walks dank basements where a Fight Club had been the night before, when he comments that "Tyler had been busy setting up franchises."

Again, Fincher moves the viewer toward the shocking plot twist, this time taking away all but the slightest bit of doubt. Jack goes into another bar and stops when he hears the kitchen staff chanting "His name was Robert Pulson, his name was Robert Pulson." Jack turns when the bartender asks "welcome back sir." Jack asks "Do you know me?" Puzzled, the bartender asks "Is this a test sir?" Jack assures the man that it's not a test. The bartender tells Jack "You were in here last Thursday, asking how security was. It's fine sir." Jack then asks the bartender "Who do you think I am?" The bartender replies after again inquiring about the possibility of a test, "You're Mr. Durden, you're the one that gave me this" and the man holds up the same burn as Jack received when making soap with Tyler. Another voiceover from Jack, "Please return your chair to the upright position."

Jack is now desperately confused. He returns to his hotel room and calls Marla, asking her if they ever had sex. Jack is searching for something. He is trying to put together the last pieces in Fincher's puzzle of a plot. Marla asks "Do you mean have we had sex or made love?" making Jack further dance for his answer. Marla finally unlocks the mystery for the viewer "You fuck me then snub me, you love me then hate me, you show me your sensitive side then you turn into a total asshole, is that a pretty accurate description of our relationship Tyler?" Fincher gives us another voice-over in Jack's voice "We have just lost cabin pressure."

Then to confirm what Jack and the viewer just heard, Jack asks Marla to say his name. Marla exclaims “TYLER DURDEN! TYLER DURDEN!”

Marla hangs up the phone and Jack turns at the sound of Tyler’s voice. There sitting in front of Jack is Tyler, only he looks somewhat different, his hair cut very short, wearing odd clothing. Tyler is upset, chastising Jack for breaking his promise and talking to Marla about him.

Jack presses Tyler to tell him what’s going on, asking the question “why do people think I’m you?” Tyler explains everything to Jack and to the viewer. Jack wants to break free from who he is. He wants to look like Tyler, talk like Tyler, he wants to be “smart, capable, and confident.” Tyler explains that little by little Jack is being taken over by Tyler Durden, and Fincher clears up any ambiguity of the question of Jack’s identity completing a brilliantly administered plot twist.

Fincher supports Tyler’s explanation with a series of flashback fast cuts and cinematography that looks like it was filmed on liquid. Fincher shows Jack in various scenes in the film that originally had Tyler in that position. The viewers sees Jack over the police commissioner speaking the words that Tyler had originally spoken, Jack barking out the rules of Fight Club, Jack fighting himself in a parking lot absent Tyler, and Jack yelling Tyler’s rhetoric at Project Mayhem soldiers scaling down a building to start a fire and paint a big face on its side. Although this latter scene was not actually in the film earlier, Fincher uses it to show Jack clearly in a Tyler-like state.

Fincher also flashes to Jack having sex with Marla, which prompts Tyler to bring something up that will drive the film to its conclusion. Tyler thinks Marla is a

problem and says that "Marla knows too much and we have to think about how this may compromise our plans." The conversation with his alterself makes Jack pass out. In another intertextual voice-over we hear Jack explaining a change over, where a reel change occurs in a movie and the movie goes on without the audience ever knowing. Jack has made the change over mentally, but nobody sees a difference. To the outside world, he is Tyler Durden.

Jack awakes and immediately rushes out of his hotel and heads back home. By this time he is questioning his own sanity, asking "Am I sleeping, have I been Tyler longer and longer?" A quick cut of a plane in flight, then Jack on the plane, and then Jack is in the house. He finds the house empty, except for several bathtubs full of explosives. A cut to Tyler in an earlier scene saying "with the right house hold chemicals one can make almost anything." Cut back to Jack moving throughout the house gathering the files that he had seen earlier. He begins calling the telephone numbers that he finds in the files and eventually discovers they all belong to large corporate offices in the city. Jack begins to understand. The buildings are all targets. Jack calls one of the numbers and tries to warn the building's security about the impending doom. But the voice on the other end tells Jack "everything is under control sir, we're solid." Jack next goes to see Marla to explain to her that her life is in danger. Although Marla is at first angry and hesitant she agrees to sit down and listen to Jack.

Jack and Marla sit down in a local diner to talk. In a wonderful tongue-and-cheek scene the waiter leans over Jack's shoulder and says "sir anything you order is on the house." Annoyed, Marla wants to know why, then proceeds to order a large

amount of food, including clam chowder, to take advantage of the situation. Jack stops the waiter and says “clean food please,” to which the waiter replies “sir may I advise against the lady eating the chowder.”

Jack apologizes to Marla for the way he treated her and confesses that he really likes her and he doesn’t want anything to happen to her. He explains that her life is in danger and she needs to get out of town. Infuriated, Marla walks out with Jack chasing behind. He catches her and forces her to take money and get on a bus out of town, warning to avoid major cities for a while. Marla takes the money as “asshole tax” and says to Jack “Tyler, you’re the worse thing that ever happened to me.” And she departs on the bus.

Jack next goes to the police and asks to be arrested, telling the police that he is the leader of a terrorist organization. Jack sits in a room with several police officers and tells them all about Fight Club and Project Mayhem. Jack is now fully accepting of the fact that he is Tyler. He explains to the police that the organization, of which he is the head, plans to blow up the corporate headquarters of several major credit card companies. The police officer in charge gets up from the table and tells Jack to stay there and he’ll check some of this out. He leaves the room. After a brief moment of stillness one of the cops still present in the room says “I really admire what you are doing sir, you’re a brave man.” The police officers in the room proclaim their admiration for Jack and they proceed to inform him that it is necessary to remove his testicles. Jack is shocked, yelling “but you’re the police.” Against his screams of protest that are soon muffled, the police pick him up, place him on the table, and place a knife under his testicles. However, in a moment of confusion Jack manages to grab

a gun from a holster and backs his assailants away. Shaken, Jack waves the gun at the police and, in another bit of parodistic dialogue reaching back to film noir, Jack yells “the first person out this fucking door gets a lead salad.”

As Jack runs out of the police station Fincher moves the plot a step closer toward its conclusion. As Jack runs, Fincher puts the shot in slow motion and a voice-over from Jack saying “I ran until my muscles hurt and my veins pumped battery acid.” Jack eventually reaches one of the buildings that is going to be blown up. As Jack tries to break through the plexy glass front door, Tyler appears behind him. Again Jack tries to break into the building, and Tyler appears inside the building now taunting Jack with laughter. Jack pulls the gun out of his pocket and fires through the door, thus gaining entry. Inside he finds a van full of explosives.

Jack enters the van and looks over a bomb and begins preparing to diffuse it. Tyler tries to convince him otherwise by saying “This is the greatest thing you’ve ever done.” As Jack babbles to himself about discounting the bomb, Tyler informs him there are ten other bombs in ten other buildings. Jack screams at Tyler “since when is Project Mayhem about murder?” Again, Fincher reinforces the anti-malicious rhetoric of the film. Tyler explains that the buildings are empty and the security and custodial staff all belong to Project Mayhem. Tyler further states that “we’re not killing anyone we’re setting them free.” At this point Fincher is very explicit about avoiding the representation of malicious brutality.

After some interesting banter with Tyler about what is in Jack’s head and Tyler’s head, Jack manages to disconnect the bomb by focusing on what is in Tyler’s head, because what’s in Tyler’s head must be in Jack’s head. Fincher shows that Jack

understands his split identity, which will become important at the end of the film.

However, disconnecting the bomb doesn't sit well with Tyler, who begins to pummel Jack around the garage.

Tyler advances on Jack and Jack draws the gun that he still possesses, firing at Tyler to no avail. Fincher finally removes any and all doubt that Tyler is a fiction of Jack's mind. In another moment of intertextual parody, Tyler strikes a kung fu movie pose, then attacks Jack. Jack tries to get away, but with some interesting editing, Tyler appears everywhere Jack tries to go. Also, Fincher cuts to a view of a garage security camera monitor and the viewer sees Jack fighting himself on the black and white screen. Jack is thrown down a stair case and is knocked unconscious.

A fade out of the black that is Jack's unconsciousness and Jack hears Tyler's voice telling him that there is just three minutes to go. The viewer is back to the beginning of the film where Jack is tied to a chair, confirmed by a voice-over from Jack saying "this is where we came in." And then Jack says to Tyler "I still can't think of anything to say." Tyler's reply is a bold and explicit piece of intertextuality, simply commenting "ah, flashback humor."

As Jack contemplates his situation he looks out the window and sees members of Project Mayhem bringing Marla to Tyler. Jack pleads with Tyler, but Tyler becomes angry, yelling "how far have you come because of me." Jack now begins trying to reason his way out of the situation. He looks at the gun in Tyler's hand and says "the guns in your hand, the gun's in my hand" and the gun appears in Jack's hand. Tyler is apathetic and responds simply with "interesting." Jack then places the barrel of the gun under his chin. Tyler, moderately annoyed asks "why would you want to

put a gun to your head.” Jack replies “our head.” Then he goes on to say “Tyler, I want you to really listen to me, my eyes are open.” Jack pulls the trigger blowing a hole, presumably, through his cheek. Tyler staggers and has his last piece of dialogue in the film as he asks “what’s that smell?” Smoke snakes out of Tyler’s head and a cut to the back of his head shows a huge hole. Tyler falls to the floor, and cut to a medium shot and Jack looks down to where Tyler fell. Tyler is gone.

The Project Mayhem members now enter the room where Jack is being held and bring in Marla, who is venomous with anger. Stunned by Jack’s appearance the Project Mayhem soldiers comment on how bad he looks. Jack orders them to release Marla and she comes screaming at him stopping abruptly when she sees his face. The Project Mayhem crew leaves to find Jack some gauze. Marla insists on medical attention, but Jack tells her not to worry, everything is going to be fine. As he says this, through the windows, buildings across the street begin to explode. Jack takes Marla’s hand and tells her “trust me everything is going to be fine” as buildings begin to crash in the background. Jack’s last words in the film are to Marla when he says “you met me at a very strange time in my life.” In a closing medium range shot Fincher has Jack and Marla looking at each other longingly then throw the window as buildings collapse. They are holding hands and from the back look very much alike, offering a final sense of adrogeny. The frame flickers and a quick cut of a man’s penis and then the credits.

It is worth noting that the end of the film is quite a bit different from the end of Chuck Palahniuk’s book. The end of the film can readily be interpreted as a Hollywood ending, with Jack saving Marla from Tyler. And it is with her rescue that

Jack is himself saved. Although the final shot of the film is parody, with Jack and Marla lovingly watching the neon sunset explosion of building, Fincher appears to deviate toward a more resoundingly Hollywood resolution. Palahniuk's book has Marla rescuing Jack, with the help of the testicular cancer support group. In the book, Jack ends up in a psychiatric ward waiting to be released, being reinforced by the people that bring him his meals with gestures like "Can't wait for your return Mr. Durden."

CHAPTER 3

ANALYSIS AND DECONSTRUCTION OF THE FILM *FIGHT CLUB*

Hutcheon (1988) argues that an analysis of a postmodern text must include a consideration of parody and irony. According to Hutcheon, postmodern parody “uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it seeks to challenge” (p. 3). The use of postmodern parody in film critiques the assumptions of realism and modernity by ironically displaying and exploiting those assumptions. Thus, “parody is a perfect postmodern form . . . for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (Hutcheon 1988, p. 11).

Fincher makes extensive use of parody in the film *Fight Club* to subvert traditional visual styles, narrative styles, and cultural practices. *Fight Club* is an exceptional example of a film that challenges artistic and cultural norms. *Fight Club* succeeds as a subversive text because of the “layered” approach at subversion that Fincher employs, seeking to subvert cinematically, with unconventional visual techniques; narratively, with unconventional story-telling techniques; and culturally, by combining visual and story-telling strategies to subvert and challenge normative cultural practices. Such a multi-layered approach is recognized by McClure and McClure (2001) when they discuss the tendency of postmodern cultural practices to subvert “notions of author, narrator, subject position, plot, temporal sequencing, representation, and subjectivity” (p. 82). Moreover, *Fight Club* makes extensive use of intertextuality, a form of parody, that is often associated with postmodern texts

(Woods, 1999). Fincher weaves intertextual dialogue and visuals to craft a parodic statement.

Cinematically, *Fight Club* is an intriguing and clearly subversive film. One particular use of intertextuality is a caricature of Brad Pitt flashed at points during the film. Fincher uses this highly unconventional visual effect to parody the usual Hollywood special effects, and to parody the Hollywood star power effect, which in this case is the star power of Brad Pitt. Rather than the usual explosions or grotesquely morphing bodies, Fincher flashes a small Brad Pitt down in the corner of the frame when Jack first speaks to his doctor about his insomnia. This caricature of Pitt is the anti-special effect, reducing Pitt, the star attraction of the film, to a comical intertextual copy of the real thing. It doesn't appear that Fincher is using the Pitt caricature as a device in the plot for the purpose of showing the moment that Jack creates Tyler and gives him form. The momentary visual is such a discrete act that it is difficult to interpret it as a plot device. Rather it appears to be a playful juxtaposing that is usually found in postmodern texts (Woods, 1999).

Fincher also uses an intertextual technique in the scene where Jack is discussing Tyler's job as a projectionist and that he splices pornography into family films. Tyler reaches into the upper right corner of the frame and points to a "cigarette burn," explaining that a "cigarette burn" is the cue to switch reels in the projectionist's booth. Again, Fincher uses an unconventional technique, exposing the convention and adding to the critical and parodic attitude of the film.

Fincher also makes frequent use of intertextual references to the cinematic with dialogue. References to Ozzie and Harriet and Jack "thanking the Academy" are

obvious examples. One of the most interesting uses of this intertextual dialogue is the film noir reference to a “lead salad” that Jack makes during the third stage of the film while in the police department. With such a reference, Fincher weaves a historic pop-cultural antecedent into a film that challenges a pop-cultural existence.

Perhaps the most subversive piece of intertextuality in *Fight Club* is Fincher’s use of it in a self-reflexive manner, in other words, he turns the film in on itself. There is one small but exceptional use of this technique in the film. As with many postmodern storytellers, Fincher plays with plot sequencing and uses a temporal disruption to add a type of desperation to the film. *Fight Club* begins and ends at the same point, eventually bringing the narrative, as told by Jack, full circle. As Jack awakens to find himself in the same position in which the film began, he makes a reference to the beginning of the film stating that he “still can’t think of anything to say.” Tyler’s reply of “hmm, flash back humor.” In two pieces of dialogue, Fincher has his characters momentarily cognizant of the fact that they are part of the film. His characters not only exist in the narrative, but are aware that they exist in the narrative. This moment of “narrative awareness” by the characters, coupled with intertextual references of past film genres, terms of art, and references to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, expose the barriers between reality and fiction; between life and art. The difference between the real world and the world of celluloid fiction is undermined.

Fincher also relies on some traditional Hollywood special effects designed to give the viewer a “rush” and help develop his story. The flashback scenes that Fincher uses at the moment Jack discovers he is Tyler, is a good example of this fairly

common approach to special effects in the film. Although the liquid-like cinematography is interesting, it in itself isn't particularly subversive. It only gains some critical achievement when it is considered as part of the film's overall narrative. This is the case when Jack and Tyler are fighting each other in the garage, shortly after Jack realizes that he and Tyler are one person. This is certainly not a style of effect that is new to Hollywood, nor is it a particularly subversive visually. However, these visual effects, coupled with the overall plot's pace and themes of the film, come together as a subversive narrative.

The first-person narrative used in *Fight Club*, a characteristic of postmodern narratives, lends a provincial, highly subjective viewpoint to the film. Gone is the great, all knowing narrator with an objective eye that is aware of all the mistakes and flaws of the characters. Rather, the viewer relies on Jack to lead the way through the narrative. The viewer becomes aware of Jack's difficulties only when Jack does. The viewer learns of Tyler and Marla's first sexual encounter only as Jack learns of it. The viewer learns of Bob's death only when Jack learns of it. There is nothing that the viewer knows – revealed in the narrative – that Jack doesn't know. Using such a point-of-view in the narrative is subversive in two important ways: first, it subverts past mainstream story-telling techniques, challenging hegemonic Hollywood narrative practices; second, it subverts the notion of modern objectivity and a place outside the world in which the world maybe viewed and critiqued. Rather it brings the viewer into the film, experiencing it in the same capacity as Jack – subjectively. For Fincher, the first person narrative allows him to use an ingenious plot twist and have a more dramatic effect as the viewer discovers Jack's dual identity at the same instant as Jack.

Another postmodern characteristic of *Fight Club* is the retelling, or reinterpretation of history. Although the film *Fight Club* itself is not an explicit retelling of, or challenge to, a particular historical moment or event, there are pieces of dialogue that are clearly historiographic. Certainly Tyler's belief that this generation of men "didn't live through a depression or have a great war to fight," is part of what he sees as the overall problem. He sees those catastrophic events as bringing purpose to life and establishing a generation's attitude toward men. Tyler also takes a subversive shot at cultural history discussing how men are told that they are going to be rock stars or wealthy businessmen, and that is simply not the case. Tyler challenges America's oldest grand-narrative, that individual determination will lead to fame and fortune. Historiographic references of past and present offer no real historical interpretation, rather it offers what Patrick Phillips (Nelmes, 1996) identifies as characteristically postmodern, "a nostalgic substitute for any real exploration of either the past or present." Such a nostalgic substitute is exactly what is presented in *Fight Club*.

The intertextual dialogue, visual effects, temporal disruption, first-person narrative, and historiographic challenges are all characteristics of a postmodern text and are used by Fincher to build a subversive film. These subversive techniques challenge normative story-telling conventions, but it is the power of the subversive narrative that challenges cultural tenets and cultural hegemony. And the key cultural tenets challenged in *Fight Club* are rampant capitalism and materialistic narcissism. *Fight Club* depicts these cultural tenets as hegemonic grand-narratives gone wildly awry. The film challenges these themes in two very distinct ways: first, though Tyler

and his postulations and chosen life style; second through the instillation of the very ideas it seeks to displace.

Fincher clearly challenges the ideology of rampant capitalism through the use of Tyler and his speeches. From the first moment that Tyler Durden is introduced, he preaches his anti-materialistic philosophy in a straight-forward and unforgiving manner. Tyler's rhetoric explicitly attacks everything corporate, narcissistic and material. He demystifies for the viewer the illusions of safety on an aircraft, the ridiculous names given to mere blankets, the idea of self-improvement, and self-importance.

Tyler's life, as well as Jack's after he meets Tyler, also explicitly attacks the idea of the typical consumer life. Tyler not only lacks the much valued corporate work ethic, he sabotages it. Jack refers to Tyler as a food service guerilla-terrorist, whose goal is to eventually sue the very company that employs him. His primary source of income is making soap out of fat that he steals from a lipposuction clinic, ironically recycling and returning that which has been discarded for purposes of vanity. Tyler chooses to live in a place without television, rejecting what is perhaps the very signifier of a consumer society. Tyler's whole existence, at least in the first half of the film, is a complete rejection of contemporary life.

On a more subtle level, *Fight Club* challenges hegemonic processes by installing then subverting, and as such demystifying those processes. As the film transitions from its first to its second part, Tyler and *Fight Club* mutate into the very thing that they seek to challenge, finally becoming Project Mayhem. As *Fight Club* expands it eventually turns into, as pointed out by Jack, Tyler's own franchise, with

Tyler as the CEO. He gives orders and people listen, he advocates an aggressive, take-no-prisoners attitude mirroring the corporate raiding era of the 1980's (Giroux, 2001). Project Mayhem is another corporate entity, another corporate identity which brings Jack full circle. Instead of the usual white button down oxford, the uniform for Project Mayhem is all black. The parallels with an Orwellian nightmare seem clear. Whether Project Mayhem or Corporation X, all members dress alike, talk alike and follow instructions in hopes of progressing beyond that point which they currently find themselves. Clearly Fincher makes a powerful point that power leads to hierarchy, and eventually everything social succumbs to that hierarchical order. It is perhaps here that the ironic status of postmodernism is most clear. Perhaps entering into criticism of modernity leads to the inevitable instillation of order and hierarchy.

Beyond the subversive challenges to corporate/materialistic cultural tenants, a central theme of Fincher's *Fight Club* is the question of identity, particularly masculine identity. In the postmodern era, identity is not rooted or fixed in the individual. Rather it is a shifting social process, constantly being renegotiated and reinvented. Identity becomes a process by which the individual socially constructs himself.

Jack struggles throughout the film looking to discover who he is. He seeks his masculine self – his noble purpose. Jack's goal is allusive. He is confronted with a cultural geography that falls between the masculine and feminine. As a result, he slides more and more into his self-created dementia. Fincher weaves his narrative around this core concept of masculine identity, challenging the modernist tenants that

have illuminated this concept of identity as given, with an ever evolving process that asks what does it mean to be male in a postmodern society.

Fincher takes the implicit theme of identity and collides it with the explicit anti-corporate theme, and shows the consumer age emasculation of men. No longer do men seem to have jobs that offer them some fulfillment and identity (Giroux, 2001). Rather, the information age has led to the feminization of men. There are numerous references to, and symbolic acts of, castration throughout the film. Bob is certainly a symbol of today's emasculated male, equipped with breasts and lacking testicles. Fincher seems to be saying that like a cancer, the new corporate culture has taken away that which makes men, men. Despite the fact that Jack isn't suffering from testicular cancer he begins to find relief at the group meeting because he too, at a spiritual level, has been castrated.

Again, the film turns on itself and installs that which it seeks to subvert. As the film progresses and Project Mayhem develops, first Tyler and his crew attack the police chief and threaten to castrate him, then one of the Project Mayhem members cuts the elastic, in a very explicit form of symbolic castration, that has been wrapped around the police chief's testicles. Finally, of course, Project Mayhem members try to castrate Jack at Tyler's orders. Tyler creates Fight Club in an attempt to reclaim that which is masculine, but in the end it leads to yet another version of emasculation.

A very interesting and antithetical theme that runs through *Fight Club*, a film that strives to make the point that men are losing their masculinity, is homoeroticism. There is a strong underlining homoeroticism in the relationship that exists between Tyler and Jack. The Ozzie and Harriet reference, the hint at a menage-a-trios, and

Tyler's kiss on Jack's hand followed by a playful, albeit confused giggle, are all ambiguously displayed for the viewer. With this homoerotic subtext, Fincher again pulls the viewer in paradoxical directions. Although making a case for a return to masculinity, he builds male to male relationships, which in many cases have an underlying femininity. Perhaps, Fincher is trying to make a reference to a two-thousand-year-old Socratic ideal of male to male relationships. More likely, however, Fincher seeks to subvert the idea of the typical romantic relationship while parodying buddy films of the past.

Certainly Fincher's portrayal of Jack and Tyler is a parody of past buddy genre relationships in the likes of Newman and Redford, Lancaster and Douglas, Martin and Lewis, and Glover and Gibson. Once Marla is added to make a trio, Jack and Tyler very much take on the Newman-Redfordesque persona, and *Fight Club* looks somewhat like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Of course the irony here is that in order to create this infamous pairing of past genres, Fincher splits Jack in two in a burlesque of the genre. Fincher's parody of the popular and profitable buddy film of the past again illustrates his desire to subvert that which is conventional Hollywood.

Jack also is parodistic of other film characters and images. Certainly Edward Norton has the worrisome stare of Dustin Hoffman in the 1960's lost soul film *The Graduate* (an early subversive masterpiece in its own right). Jack's devotion to Marla is reminiscent of young Ben's love for Elaine. Much in the same way that Ben comes and rescues Elaine, Jack comes and rescues Marla. Both couples face an uncertain future but face that future hand in hand. On a darker level, Jack bears a strong resemblance to Travis Bickle, the psychotic cabbie in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.

Both Jack and Travis are haunted by insomnia, and like Tyler, Travis works the night shift, living in a world lit only by neon. The character of Travis Bickle, is also, to a large degree, emasculated. His search for meaning, his difficulties with women, and even his apathetic view toward pornography, point to emasculation and a male identity problem. Travis Bickle's answer to male emasculation is the assassination of a politician and the saving of a young prostitute.

Tyler's answer to male emasculation is Fight Club. Fight Club is the step from mere philosophy to action. What does the punishment of Fight Club offer its participants? In the film the pure physicality has a cathartic effect allowing an escape from the doldrums of the empty life that these men seem to lead. Fincher installs a grotesque and temporary escapism. At one point in the film, Jack discusses with the viewer how in the real world a copy boy can be a god for a few minutes when he trounces the maître d' of some restaurant, and how a person isn't the same as he is during Fight Club as in the outside world, he's a different person altogether. Men come to Fight Club to be unshackled and to be part of a premodern wolfpack, with its attendant ritual catharsis.

Of course one of the main criticisms of the film is its stark violence and how it seemingly promotes hypermasculinity. Such criticism seems short sighted, since the premodern alternative of brutish physicality is ultimately subverted as well. Also, The fights during Fight Club are resoundingly non-violent, with the one exception of Jack beating the blond Project Mayhem crewmember toward the third part of the film. Otherwise, the fights are physical but not violent. The fights lack malice, and rather, remain highly physical contests between men. Fight Club then, is about the catharsis

of physicality and not violence. Certainly there is a male appeal to such a contest that is probably appalling to woman. The cathartic appeal of basic physical confrontation in ritualistic scapegoating and mortification clearly is installed. Such physical tests that are purely *mano e mano* may take on a cathartic appeal, but are ultimately subverted in *Fight Club*.

The physicality of *Fight Club* tends to put things into a different perspective for Jack and friends. He mentions how the volume on everything else gets turned down, and how it appears to make everything seem less than it used to be. The fights are antithetical to everything else in Jack's life. Jack's life is about self-improvement. He is constantly trying to buy the perfect furniture and build a respectable wardrobe. But to Tyler self-improvement is nonsense. It's like "polishing the brass on the Titanic."

To Tyler self-improvement is masturbation; self-destruction is the only real path toward self-discovery. Again, *Fight Club* installs and subverts. Although Tyler preaches self-destruction, it is self-destruction for the reason of self-improvement. To Tyler "only after you have lost everything, can you be anything." The ultimate goal is to become more than you are, which is a conflicting message with the notion that "you are not special" that is shouted at the Project Mayhem members. But a man *is* special, he's a god, but only during *Fight Club*.

To a large degree it appears that Fincher does not want *Fight Club* to be about gratuitous violence. And for the most part he succeeds. With the exception of the severe beating that Jack gives the blond young man, and the shooting of Bob, Fincher goes out of the way to make his point without gratuitous violence. Tyler points out

that all the buildings that are to be destroyed are empty, controlled by Project Mayhem. And even the Asian convenience store clerk is never in any real danger. Tyler is not a murderer, although the viewer is lead to believe he may have taken that step with Marla. But he doesn't. He isn't allowed too. It is the thought of injury to Marla that brings Jack and Tyler back together into one person. So, it may also be postulated that Marla was not in any real danger either. The empty violence of *Fight Club* is a subversion of the usual Hollywood violence, that usually takes the form of gory, "shoot'm-up" blood lust celebrations. Fincher seems to carry anti-Hollywood subversions throughout the entire film with one glaring exception – the ending of the film.

The ending of *Fight Club* seems to be in contrast to the theme and plot sequencing that drove Chuck Palahniuk's book. The ending of the book seems to correlate more with the rest of the narrative as depicted in the film, but for some reason the ending was changed quite substantially. Palahniuk's book ends with Marla coming to rescue Jack with the cancer support group in tow, not Jack coming to rescue Marla. Moreover, the end of the book finds Jack in a asylum awaiting his eventual release, spurred by the praise and anticipation of the food service workers that slide his meals under the door while uttering "can't wait for your return Mr. Durden" (Palahniuk 1996). The film has Jack coming to the rescue of Marla, ensuring that as their relationship moves forward, things will be much improved. While Fincher maintains some very interesting cinematic features, including the final adrogenous shot of Marla and Jack, that seemingly installs a romantic, Hollywood ending. He wraps everything up in a tight little package, as the viewer witnesses the

disappearance of Jack's alter ego into, a synthesis with a new Jack emerging and ready to create his own identity. The viewer gets the feeling that Jack's sudden "awakening" with his "eyes open" marks the end of Project Mayhem. Chuck Palahniuk's book leaves exactly the opposite feeling.

Such a comparison is meaningless to anyone who has not digested both the book and the film. However, such a choice may indicate that *Fight Club*'s ending was mainstreamed to please a wider viewing audience and soften a harsh critical response. With the dissolution of Tyler from the screen and a rejection of what he had done because he wasn't "himself," Jack compromises much of the powerful anti-material, anti-corporate culture rhetoric of the film, representing it as the ranting of a delusional schizophrenic. There is no getting around the fact that Jack *was* a delusional schizophrenic. But Fincher's ending rejects both the masculinity of modern corporate culture and premodern brutality which are the root cause of Jack's psychosis. The viewer is invited to feel sympathetic to those hegemonic processes that Tyler rallied against, in a cult of victimage that also includes femininity and is horrified by its premodern alternative. So, in the end Jack comes to his senses and to the rescues himself and Marla.

There is another possibility however. One that if intentional, is easily lost on the viewer, and one that is much more subversive. Jack doesn't rescue Marla in a romantic Hollywood ending. Rather, Marla's presence does, in fact, rescue Jack. And it is Jack's ultimate embracing of Marla that is the film's ultimate subversion. Marla is the catalyst for Jack's eventual integration with Tyler, remaining the synthesis at the end of the film.

The character of Marla is one of the most dynamic in the film and represents one of the elements with the most potential for discussion and disagreement. It is not hard to imagine that one key area that opens *Fight Club* to rash criticism, from a feminist view, is its portrayal of Marla Singer. Arguably, *Fight Club* installs anti-feminist ideologies. Marla is portrayed as a sexual toy for the use of Tyler. Tyler calls her a “sport fuck,” indicating that there is no love or emotional commitment to her whatsoever. Any emotional support comes from man to man contact in the film. Her character may be read as a drug-dependent, lewd, sexually promiscuous girl looking to be saved and taken care of by a man. Marla functions as a victim to male sexual gratification. But even this classification is fleeting, as the film subverts this by installing homoeroticism. Any such a one-sided reading is very much limited as it must neglect or ignore the critical subversions.

Marla could as well be interpreted as a strong woman, a survivor who finds a way to get by with or without Jack, a liberated woman as it were. Marla isn't anymore needy than any character in the film, even less so. Marla is not the reason Jack is the way he is. Rather, Marla is a victim of the same culture that has emasculated Jack. She states herself that she was a “lovely girl at one time and that nobody knows what happened to her.” Marla is an intelligent, strong woman, sexually emancipated, but as unhappy and troubled as all the other characters in the film. Ultimately, *Fight Club* does not blame Marla for the emasculation of Jack, or women for the plight that men face in the new information age. The film places the blame squarely on the hypermaterialistic, corporate culture. As such, an alternative and more postmodern reading of the film has Jack embracing the feminine by choosing Marla over Tyler.

And it is this embrace of the feminine that makes the ending of the film a recognition of the postmodern. The feminine (not necessarily the feminist) represents a turn toward a postmodern frame of mind, in contrast to the masculine of the modern and premodern. *Fight Club* may be about male emasculation, but it doesn't necessarily install a return to patriarchy. Postmodern texts don't offer those kinds of definitive answers (Hutcheon, 1988). Jack's embracing of the feminine is very much a subversive act when considered in the light of the masculine physicality of the film. Again however, *Fight Club*, as a postmodern text, installs and subverts the processes it challenges, exhibiting a fractured, ambiguous contradictory vision of masculinity and femininity.

The central issue of identity in *Fight Club* mirrors the fractured character of postmodernism. The ultimate substructure of the plot of *Fight Club* is driven by Jack's struggle with his own identity. The choice of Edward Norton to play Jack is interesting since he incidentally played a character with a split personality in his breakout role in *Primal Fear*. The severity of Jack's identity problems eventually leads to the creation of Tyler. Tyler is an alternative. It isn't just that Tyler is everything that Jack wants to be, Tyler is the opposite of what Jack is. He is *not* an Armani wearing corporate worker bee. Jack has split himself, and Marla navigates through the paradox of masculine identity issues. Despite actually being the same person, a friction exists between Tyler and Jack. Tyler is the hypermasculine and Jack is more feminine. Throughout the film, Fincher has Jack questioning Tyler's actions, which are in fact his own actions. The convenience store clerk, the scene with the police commissioner, and ultimately Marla, show Jack frequently questioning the

actions of Tyler, adding to his schizophrenia. When it gets too much for Jack, he spends more and more time as Tyler.

Tyler questions the notion of the culture corporate and materialistic identity. Tyler shouts to his followers at Fight Club and in Project Mayhem “you are not your job, you are not the contents of your wallet, you are not the car you drive.” Later Fincher has the same dialogue spoken by Jack, when Jack flashes back to the first Project Mayhem’s attack, when he is in the place of Tyler. Fincher uses a reiteration of this dialogue for its resolutely poignant attitude toward defining oneself through objects. Tyler is clear that everybody has an identity crisis in this postmodern, corporate culture. Tyler tells Jack that people think of changing themselves everyday, Jack was just brave enough to follow through with it. Tyler’s overall feeling is that men have an identity problem. Ultimately, they have been stripped of their identity, which has been replaced with corporate logos. Moreover, men no longer have a means of creating identity. According to Tyler, there is no great war or great recession to struggle through. There are no defining moments, only superficial promises of rock or movie stardom. Ultimately Tyler rejects the whole notion of masculine identity, telling his followers that “you are not special, you are not unique.” To Tyler there is no identity, everyone is the same organic matter, and everyone eventually ends up dead. Jack states that “on a long enough time line, everyone’s chance of survival is zero.” In the end, identity means little.

Fincher exasperates the identity issue by mixing in questions of gender with adrogenous visuals. Bob with the high voice and “bitch tits,” the adrogenous shot at

the end with Jack and Marla, and the homoeroticism all question an identity based on gender and sexuality.

Within *Fight Club* there also exists the paradox of cultural geography. Giroux (2001) astutely recognizes that *Fight Club* identifies a new enemy to democracy. No longer is the large and ever looming state the potential Leviathan, of which Thomas Hobbs warned. Rather the new gargantuan is the multi-national corporation. Giroux criticizes *Fight Club* for not addressing the issues that he feels are central to the problems facing today's society. It is questionable whether or not Fincher is necessarily addressing any one central issue. Moreover, it is unfair to simply attack a text because it doesn't address certain issues, particularly when they may not be central to the narrative as envisioned by the artist. A text should be analyzed for what it does or does not do, not for what it should have done. However, one criticism that Giroux has of *Fight Club* that is worth exploration is the representation of public and private spaces and lives.

The corporate culture that has pervaded western society over much of the twentieth century has driven people out of the public realm and into a more restricted space that has been referred to as "private enclaves" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). With the growth of corporate culture, and the post World War Two suburban explosion, people have stopped coming together to discuss public issues and have retreated to a more private materialistic life (Kunstler, 1993). The turn toward private life is accompanied by a degree of narcissistic behavior and a move toward a seemingly empty hyperindividualism.

This theme is evident in *Fight Club*, installed in Jack who has cocooned himself in an empty yuppie fortress. He describes his apartment as an enormous concrete vault of a structure with foot thick walls and sealed glass, Jack's condominium is the perfect hide away. Moreover, Jack has filled his private place with item after item of catalog lifestyle choices. Jack lives the private materialist life of a worker bee. The notion of a private life is symbolized by Jack's description of living in a "single serving" world as he jets around from one place to another having superficial discussions with "single serving friends" spending his nights in lonely hotel rooms with little public contact. Even the hotel employees only appear on television as part of a hotel commercial. When Fincher shows Jack having coffee at an outside café, everyone keeps to themselves. Marla is another lost and private soul. She lives in a small room at a hotel with little outside contact. In both the hotel and Jack's condominium, people blot out others by simply turning up the television. Fincher's characters live privatized lives.

However, it is a return to public spaces that frees the characters or at least helps them deal with their trite existence. Both Marla and Jack go to support group meetings in order to find solace and rest. It is in this public sphere that Jack and Marla open up and seek to address their problems. Ironically, they are both in this public sphere living a lie, pretending to be someone else and in Jack's case using a different name. They are living in the shadow of a true public sphere because they are afraid to enter as themselves, subverting a clear public identity. Still in need of more than what support groups can offer, Jack, with Tyler, creates Fight Club, that lays ambiguously on the slope between the public and the private.

Fight Club is a microcosm for an alternative public sphere. These men come together to have contact, identity, and an outlet for their frustrations. There is no social or material domination at Fight Club, it is all raw physicality. Everyone is socially equal and anyone can fight with anyone. Tyler and Jack both participate and Jack is depicted losing as often as winning his fights. Moreover, everyone has to fight, there are no voyeurs in Fight Club. All are participants.

However, there is a question as to the exclusionary nature of Fight Club. Although men of all colors are represented, women are not, or so it appears. This creates the potential for a feminist attack on the film. Although everyone in Fight Club has an equal right to a fight and can challenge anyone to a fight, including Tyler or Jack, not everyone has an equal say in the rules of Fight Club. That privilege is reserved for Jack and Tyler. Again, Fincher offers no clear statement of ideology or answers to potential questions. Rather, he installs and subverts, so that nothing is necessarily privileged.

Fincher has layered *Fight Club* with visual and narrative subversion that points a critical finger at several cultural practices and institutions. He explores issues of male emasculation, identity, corporate domination, and public vs. private cultural space. He uses cinematic techniques and intertextuality, and narrative parody that both installs and subverts traditional Hollywood styles. His plot structure allows the viewer to experience a Hitchcock like plot twist allowing for a different reading of the film upon the second viewing. Truly, Fincher has created a very interesting film. However, the question remains, does this film reach the rhetorical goal of critical subversion and what exactly is installed?

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

The central question of this thesis remains, does *Fight Club* as a postmodern text reach the rhetorical goal of critical subversion or does it reinforce the same hegemonic processes that it seeks to subvert? Although this analysis has been confined to the film *Fight Club*, the question posed is central to postmodern texts in general, and particularly to films that are part of a newly emerging sub-genre of postmodern film that deal with male identity. As stressed earlier in this thesis, the academy award-winning film *American Beauty*, which is very close to *Fight Club* thematically, is also part of this sub-genre. The question of critical subversion is of particular importance to this sub-genre of postmodern film because films of this sub-genre are especially susceptible to several kinds of critical attack. As a fractured culture continues to fuel issues of identity and as more and more films are identified as postmodern, the potential social impact of such films will be vital to critical discourse.

The first step in answering the question posed by this thesis is to underscore *Fight Club* as an exemplary postmodern text, which this thesis has done. *Fight Club* uses the personal first person narrative that is associated with postmodern texts (McClure & McClure, 2001; Woods, 1999). *Fight Club* uses intertextuality as a subversive technique to drive the narrative both visually and rhetorically. Intertextuality has been identified as a component of postmodern texts (Best & Kellner, 1997; Waugh, 1993; McClure & McClure, 2001; Woods, 1999). It is clearly evident that *Fight Club* subverts traditional narrative style.

Thematically, *Fight Club* attacks consumer culture, corporate control, and materialistic identity. These are the themes that are most often identified and attacked by postmodern theorists and philosophers (Best & Kellner, 1997; Woods, 1999; Jameson, 1991).

Fight Club is rooted in the search for identity, a theme common amongst films of the genre and certainly central to this film. Virtually all characters are conflicted about who they are. Jack particularly struggles with the identity question throughout the film. What does it mean to be male in the postmodern epoch? Tyler questions how the postmodern male should define himself, after all “there is no great war to fight.” And so the question becomes what is identity? Jack’s identity is a social construction. He plays a role depending on the demands of the situation. Sometimes he is a white-collar corporate soldier, other times he is the leader of a subversive group of disenfranchised men. Jack sums up the notion of a socially-constructed identity process when he states “a man isn’t the same during Fight Club as he is outside of Fight Club.” In *Fight Club’s* vision, a true self may simply not exist. Identity is a cultural “product” that is processed and packaged. In the postmodern era, the processes are corporate and materialistic. Fincher seems to be saying we are doomed to be a product produced by a superficial lifestyle. That we’re forever a cluster of different identities, never really finding a center, rather existing in a split and fractured self and in a split and fractured culture.

However, Fincher does offer room for resistance against such an inevitable existence. This resistance need not be just getting together to beat each other senseless, but also may be found by recognizing the opposites of our perceived

identity, as Jack does first with Tyler, then when he embraces Marla and the feminine.

Fincher shows that consumer culture has an enormous impact on the characters on his film. Even the character of Marla Singer, a character whose complexities offer abundant fuel for discussion, is disenfranchised because of consumer culture. She relies on stealing from Meals on Wheels in order to survive, and she goes to support groups because the coffee and human contact are free. Marla, as well as Jack, Tyler, Bob, and the rest of the film's characters are all living alienated lives.

Finally, *Fight Club* makes extensive use of parody and installs and subverts the hierarchies and hegemonic assumptions of today's postmodern culture. The instillation and parody of those processes is the main rhetorical technique employed in the film. By installing and subverting these hegemonic processes and hierarchies in a paradonic form, Fincher demystifies the very processes that exist in today's consumer culture. This axial feature of postmodern texts goes beyond mere thematic qualities, and gets at the heart of postmodernism as a critical theory. Postmodern texts parodically install and subvert, or more specifically, install to subvert. The absence of one or the other would serve to create and reinforce modern hegemonic assumptions, and bring to question any true critical value of postmodernism. It is the exposure of the hegemonic pretenses of modernity that makes postmodernism a subversive critical theory and a critical artistic practice, and not a repackaged modern facsimile.

The need to identify *Fight Club* as a postmodern text as the first step in this analysis raises another interesting question, which is sub-thematic to this thesis but is worthy of a brief exploration. The question being if a postmodern text doesn't reach its rhetorical goals, or if the text looks postmodern but misses the mark of a critical

goal, is it still a postmodern film? If *Fight Club* doesn't reach its goal of critical subversion, is it still postmodern? Or does it become a modern solipsism? *Fight Club* contains all the elements of a postmodern text, yet the question remains, does it achieve the goal of critical subversion? There is also the issue of reading the ending of the film as a traditional romantic ending in the classic Hollywood style. Do *all* elements in *Fight Club* need to be identified as postmodern, absent the potential for a modern reading of the film, and does the film need to reach a critical subversive goal in-order to be a true postmodern film? The answer is no. Identifying a text as postmodern because of its narrative features, and in the case of film, its cinematic features, is *a priori* to a consideration of whether or not the text reaches critical goals. It is only through a critical theoretical approach that a text is identified as belonging to a particular genre, then analyzed for critical effectiveness.

Moreover, a postmodern critical approach illustrates the discursive interdependence of postmodernism and modernism when expressed in critical theory. Postmodernism cannot dismiss the modern development of critical theory. Critical theory is a product of modernism and predates the postmodern. However, postmodernism makes a powerful contribution to critical theory as it provides a less than partisan exposure of embedded ideologies. Hutcheon (1988) argues that "parody's contradictory ideological implications . . . make it an apt mode of criticism for postmodernism, itself paradoxical in its conservative installing and then radical contesting of conventions" (p. 129). While not claiming to be an emancipator as other critical theories do, postmodern critical and aesthetic practices do reveal substructural hegemonic practices.

I have, in this thesis, attempted to layout the elements of postmodern texts, and show that *Fight Club* does indeed fall into this category of postmodern. But does *Fight Club* critically subvert cultural practices? The answer is yes. *Fight Club* does achieve a critical goal of subversion. *Fight Club* exposes ideologies by thematically installing and subverting via antithetical juxtapositions of identity, narrative, and cinematography; leaving the viewer to contemplate ambiguous paradoxes. However, critical subversion in *Fight Club* comes with a few caveats.

By the end of the film, the viewer has a distinct impression of Tyler's view of corporate culture and the anti-materialistic attitude that accompanies it. The sharp dialogue delivered articulately by Tyler invades the viewer. Tyler is direct in both speech and action, and the viewer doesn't easily forget what Tyler Durden is saying and advocating. Fincher's use of this direct dialogue and action impacts the viewer and offsets any difficulty the viewer may have in understanding the subtlety of the postmodern rhetorical practice of installing to subvert. However, the implicit subversion that this technique carries can easily lead to alternative readings, even by a media savvy audience. The viewer must navigate the paradox of the text, perhaps interpreting a parodic element as something more, such as an authentic representation. An alternative reading has the potential to undermine any critical subversive goals of the film. The film *Fight Club* is particularly vulnerable to either a feminist reading or a Marxist reading.

As mentioned earlier in this thesis as well as immediately above, *Fight Club* is, in part, vulnerable to a feminist critique, and such an interpretation would in fact undermine the subversive rhetoric and postmodern aesthetic practices of the film. The

physicality of *Fight Club* could easily be interpreted as hypermasculinity and male violence, and Marla could be viewed as a mere object of sexual gratification. Such a feminist reading of the film would greatly undercut any subversive message, and do the film a great disservice.

Marla remains an incredibly memorable character of the film. She survives trial after trial, ultimately becoming the catalyst for Jack's recovery. Marla's abundant eroticism is not by any means degrading, rather it is an expression of sexual awareness and equality. Such equality is brought into focus in the last shot of the film, which has Jack and Marla staring out the window making it difficult to tell them apart. Marla is representative of a woman of the postmodern age. She is strong, intelligent and sexually aggressive, while troubled by the same social forces as her male counterparts. Reading Marla as being oppressed by male dominance is a distressingly one-sided view. *Fight Club's* hypermasculinity that may offend feminists is installed so it may be subverted parodically, by the antithetical element of homoeroticism that is prevalent in the film. Moreover, the installation of the premodern wolfpack-like behavior that is first illustrated in the catharsis of *Fight Club*, is eventually subverted as it morphs into a fanatical and hierarchical Project Mayhem.

Fight Club also lends itself to a potential Marxist reading, which again subverts the rhetorical goals of the film. There is uniquely strong anti-capitalist, anti-corporate language in the film. The plot of the film unravels around ever more destructive attacks on large corporations, culminating in an attack on banking and credit institutions, the very foundation of American capitalism. However, *Fight Club* lacks any clear indication of class distinction or the have/have not opposition. The

film goes beyond who has more possessions and the reasons for wanting possessions. Economic fairness is not necessarily a question asked in the film, but such a question seems quite necessary for a Marxist text. *Fight Club*'s relentless attack on rampant corporatism is not necessarily Marxist and political economy itself may have a "postmodern" side that is more critical than a perceived Marxist theoretical foundation. To a postmodern theorist, Marxism remains another grand narrative. Reducing *Fight Club* to a purely Marxist film is, again, short sighted.

The fact of the matter is that *Fight Club* and postmodernism go beyond economic inequality to discourse inequality. Postmodernism is less about economic superstructure than narrative superstructure. Economic inequality, and all social inequalities, are maintained by narratives of hegemony. It is the grand narratives, and language epistemologies that create and hide undesirable social conditions. It is these social conditions and the discourse structures that support them, that are the focus of postmodernism. By turning the postmodern into an "ism," these discourse structures and the hegemonic processes are challenged and demystified. So, what then is the job of the postmodern author and the postmodern critic? The postmodern author uses particular techniques to construct a narrative that is politically challenging (Best & Kellner, 1997). It is the job of the postmodern critic to use particular techniques to uncover the layers of a text's discourse structure.

The postmodern author intentionally attempts to subvert, while shining a light on the oppressive features of society that are taken for granted and believed to be an unchangeable given. The postmodern author challenges the previously unquestioned grand narratives that guide, in particular, western culture. The postmodern author uses

specific “cutting edge” narrative and rhetorical techniques that are necessary to capture the attention of a media-savvy audience. Occasionally, an author’s work lends itself to an alternate reading upon a second viewing, because of details released at a point in the narrative that redefines the story. The rise of the postmodern parallels the rise of media sophistication. Postmodern texts challenge the media-savvy audience of this epoch with rhetorical demystification.

Ultimately the question becomes what critical goal is achieved by *Fight Club*? The answer is that *Fight Club* subverts modern hegemonic pretenses, particularly those that have morphed into today’s fragmented, privatized, corporate cultural practices. This is also true of postmodern critical theory in general. Although always carrying with it an element of modernity, it seeks to challenge and subvert modern pretenses. Postmodernism is both a product of and a challenge to modernity.

As a critical theory and analytical method, Postmodernism is perhaps the most important political and cultural critical practices to emerge in decades. Although, self-admittedly subjective, Postmodernism carries a sense of deconstructive equality. That is to say that Postmodernism readily challenges all potential power structures, making a formidable enemy to hegemony. However, one of the potential difficulties Postmodernism faces in the future, and one that is often advanced by critics, is the enormous scope of Postmodernism, and the fact that “postmodernism defies definition (Colbey, 183). Hans Bertens (2001) comments that “although obviously related to deconstruction, Postmodern criticism casts its net a good deal wider” (p142). The wide area being covered by Postmodernism often raises objections by more traditional critics that favor a more structured approach to criticism. However, expanding the

understanding of both its potential as a critical theory and of the way in which it operates as a cultural and critical practice will help Postmodernism remain an important element of rhetorical theory, perhaps paving the way for the next critical theory that questions the epistemological foundation of logos.

Fight Club stand as an exceptional postmodern text at the forefront of an emerging sub-genre of postmodern film. Its complexities are an example of the rhetorical and aesthetic structures of postmodern texts. As audiences demand more and more from film, postmodern texts and their complexities will change, strain, and continue to challenge traditional notions of culture and aesthetics, while making powerful social and political commentary. If postmodern film is creating a subversive canon of its own, *Fight Club* is part of it.

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