Travelling philosophy : from literature to film

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II. The Novel

Chuck Palahniuk

(1961 – Present)
Introduction

Seen as major voice of a nihilistic generation, American novelist Charles ("Chuck") Palahniuk was born in Pasco, Washington, and is most celebrated for the dark satire in his first published work - *Fight Club* (1996). It is this work that has led many to draw comparisons between Palahniuk and such contemporaries as Douglas Coupland (*Generation X*, 1991) and Bret Easton Ellis (*American Psycho*, 1991).

Palahniuk's first book, *Insomnia: If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home Already*, was never published due to his displeasure with the narrative, though a small portion of it would be used in *Fight Club*. Publishers rejected Palahniuk's next novel, *Invisible Monsters*, for being too disturbing, which led him to work on *Fight Club* - his infamous "revenge novel." *Fight Club* was initially published as a short story in the compilation *Pursuit of Happiness* (1995), which would later become chapter 6 in the novel. While the original hardcover edition enjoyed only a brief shelf-life, it generally received positive reviews. In *Publisher's Weekly*, literary critic Sybil S. Steinberg wrote that:

"Palahniuk is a risky writer who takes chances galore, especially with a particularly bizarre plot twist he throws in late in the book. Caustic, outrageous, bleakly funny, violent, and always unsettling, Palahniuk's utterly original creation will make even the most jaded reader sit up and take notice" (1996: 60).

Addressing wider themes, Los Angeles Times film critic David Ulin notes that the novel deals with "history's apparent shackling of men" (1996: 1-1). Building on this notion, in the *Journal of Men's Studies*, Kevin Boon writes that there are few "final frontiers" left, and that men have been forced to replace conquest with consumerism, which is apparently a vitally important change in manhood. He explains that: "The object of Tyler Durden's aggression is contemporary American culture, which has caged men within bars of denial and shame" (2003: 267). Elaborating on this point, Ellis said that *Fight Club*'s:

...audacious, strenuously trendy exterior is part of its point because at heart this is really a horror movie about consumerist discontent. It's about what happens when a world defines you by a nothing job, when advertising turns you into a slave bowing at a mountain of things that make you uneasy about your lack of physical perfection and how much money you don't have and how famous you aren't. It's about what happens when you're hit by the fact that your life lacks uniqueness; a uniqueness that we're constantly told we have (by parents, by school, by the media). 'Fight Club' rages against the hypocrisy of a society that continually promises us the impossible: fame, beauty, wealth, immortality, life without pain (Webster 2003: 1).

It is precisely these themes of consumerism and masculinity that have created a loyal cult following out of the 18-35 year old male demographic (of which I am a member). As a result, Palahniuk boasts one of the largest fan bases of any author in the Internet.

Largely due to the increased exposure his work received from American director David Fincher's filmic adaptation released in 1999, Palahniuk's novel has recently been scrutinized more intensely. As a result, some members of the media have labeled him a "shock writer" and a sexist because of the violence, abnormal situations, and the perceived objectification of women in his stories.\(^{135}\) These are the same charges that

were leveled against Burgess primarily after the success of Kubrick’s film. While one can draw many parallels between the two overtly violent novels, my discussion focuses on *Fight Club’s* nameless protagonist who – like Alex – possesses violent impulses that position him antithetically to a society he believes has failed him.

**Salvation Through Destruction**

The following passage presents a verbal exchange between the protagonist, Joe, and another character (known simply as “the mechanic”) that echoes the paradoxical philosophy of Tyler Durden – Joe’s mental projection. A cursory examination of this exchange between Joe and the mechanic establishes the parameters of this chapter:

The mechanic says, “If you’re male and you’re Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?” (...)

“What you end up doing,” the mechanic says, “is you spend your whole life searching for a father and God.” “What you have to consider,” he says, “is the possibility that God doesn’t like you.” (…) How Tyler saw it was that getting God’s attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all. Maybe because God’s hate is better than His indifference. (…) We are God’s middle children, according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in history and no special attention. Unless we get God’s attention, we have no hope of damnation or redemption. (…) Only if we’re caught and punished can we be saved. “Burn the Louvre,” the mechanic says, “and wipe you ass with the Mona Lisa. This way at least, God would know our names.”

In the exchange, the mechanic partially reveals the source of Joe’s angst, or the impetus behind the destructive behavior he had been exhibiting up to that point in the fabula. For some undisclosed reason, Joe has grown up without a father present. Consequently, Joe has spent his life searching for a missing father in both a corporeal and (more likely) metaphorical sense. Since he has been unable to find either, the mechanic suggests that Joe consider the possibility that God hates him. Nevertheless, God’s hate may be better than his indifference. The mechanic further suggests that God’s indifference has resulted in the perception that they are members of a generation known as “God’s middle children” with no distinct place in history. In light of this notion, the mechanic believes that they must attain God’s attention, because without it there is no hope of either damnation or redemption.

Cacophony Society is a randomly gathered network of “free spirits” united in the anarchic pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society.” Palahniuk’s participation in these events likely inspired some of the events seen in *Fight Club.*

136 Although he does take on several pseudonyms, the real name of *Fight Club’s* protagonist is never overtly revealed anywhere in the text. However, in chapter seven, the protagonist discovers numerous stacks of old *Reader’s Digests* in which there are a series of articles where organs in the human body refer to themselves in the first person. For example, “I am Jane’s Uterus” and “I am Joe’s prostrate” (58). The protagonist adopts this practice and refers to the functions of his own body parts throughout the narrative. For example, when referring to himself, he states: “I am Joe’s Shitking Groin” (170). Therefore, to make the discussion of the protagonist easier and more personal, I refer to him simply as “Joe.”


138 The implied assumption here is that it is better to be noticed than to remain anonymous, even if it is through means of destructive violence. Individuals such as Joe feel “lost” not necessarily in sin,
In order to gain God’s interest, Joe travels down the path of destructive behavior that may eventually, as the mechanic suggests, lead to such extreme acts as burning the Louvre or wiping himself with the Mona Lisa. “Only if we’re caught and punished can we be saved,” the mechanic claims. The mechanic’s assertion underscores Tyler’s seemingly incongruous notion that God’s attention and the potential for salvation from anonymity can only be found through acts of rebellion and devastation. The mechanic reinforces this claim when he states: “The lower you fall, the higher you’ll fly. The farther you run, the more God wants you back.” The buried assumptions behind the mechanic’s declaration are twofold. First, it is through failure that one can obtain success, or, in other words, it is through a negative that one may obtain a positive. Second, distancing one’s self from God will cause Him to long for your return. The second postulation is really a reinforcement of the first in the form of a specific example. In essence, “falling” deliberately through failure and disappointment provides a path to some future success and a means to acquire God’s attention.

Tyler’s notion of salvation through destruction will ultimately be imaged in light of Hegel’s understanding of self-consciousness. While it initially takes the form of desiring death of the other at the risk of its own life, authentic self-consciousness springs from the willingness to sacrifice everything material and, as a result, a life and death struggle arises between the two rival self-consciousnesses, which results in the lord - bondsman relationship embodied by Tyler and Joe respectively. With this philosophical context in view, in the following analysis of Fight Club, I examine the narrative text in an effort to concretize a story which articulates a fabula that instantiates the notion of salvation through destruction.

**Sequential Ordering**

In this section, I explore the relations between the order of events in the story and their chronological sequence in the fabula. This section precedes the others due to the narrative’s particular sequential ordering and its illumination of other story aspects and elements of the fabula that I examine in the sections that follow.

In the case of Fight Club, we are presented with an embedded fabula that explains the primary fabula. I define an embedded fabula as a fabula that exists in the narrative “then” and is, in effect, “bookended” by the primary fabula in the narrative “now.” The primary fabula is merely an occasion for a perceptible, character-bound

but rather in the sense that they have no real place in society; they desire to be “saved” from obscurity.

139 American Heritage College Dictionary (2002), 1227: “‘Salvation’: perseverance or deliverance from difficulty or evil.” The first passage seen in this chapter juxtaposes the notion of salvation as it relates to the acquisition of God’s attention. This implies that it is the responsibility of individuals to work to acquire God’s attention and its potential of salvation. Although the usage in passage implies a more religious liberation from personal sin, “salvation” (as it is demonstrated in the narrative) concerns perseverance or deliverance from the ‘numbing’ effect of a modern consumer society, rather than that of individual corruption.

140 Bal, Narratology (1997), 80. The chronological sequence of the fabula is a theoretical construction, which we can make on the basis of the laws of everyday logic that govern common reality. “According to that logic one cannot arrive in a place before one has set out to go there. In a story that is possible, however.”

141 Fight Club is divided into two distinct fabulas. The primary fabula is (roughly) comprised of ch’s 1, 29, and 30, while the embedded fabula covers chapters 2 through 28. In effect, Fight Club contains two separate narratives where one explains the other.
narrator to narrate a story. Thus, the embedded text presents a complete story with an elaborate fabula, and we gradually forget the fabula of the primary narrative until we return to the narrative “now” toward the end of the novel (Bal 1997: 52). The following two passages, seen in the narrative now, illustrate the “bookending” relationship between the fabulas:

Up on top of the Parker-Morris Building with Tyler’s gun in my mouth. While desks and filing cabinets and computers meteor down on the crowd around the building and smoke funnels up from the broken windows and three blocks down the street the demolition team watches the clock, I know all of this: the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer. Six minutes. (...) Five minutes. (...) Four minutes. I tongue the barrel into my cheek and say, you want to be a legend, Tyler, man, I’ll make you a legend. I’ve been here from the beginning. I remember everything. Three minutes (14-15).

So Tyler and I are up on top of the Parker-Morris Building with the gun stuck in my mouth. We’re down to our last ten minutes. The Parker-Morris Building won’t be here in ten minutes. I know this because Tyler knows this. The barrel of the gun pressed against the back of my throat, Tyler says, ‘We won’t really die.’ I tongue the gun barrel into my surviving cheek and say, Tyler, you’re thinking of vampires. We’re down to our last eight minutes. (...) Seven minutes. (...) Four minutes. Tyler and me at the edge of the roof, the gun in my mouth, I’m wondering how clean that gun is. Three minutes. Then somebody yells (203-204).

For the sequential ordering of these two passages to be made more readily apparent, it should be known that the narrative begins on page 12 (chapter 1) and ends on page 208 (chapter 29). Although there is a gap of 188 pages between the first and second passages (the embedded fabula), there are several obvious parallels between the passages, which include the similarity in the actors’ behavior and the location of the events. In both passages, Joe and Tyler are on the top floor of the Parker-Morris building where Tyler has a gun jammed in Joe’s mouth. Furthermore, in the first passage, we read that office equipment plummets on to the crowd below around the building, smoke escapes from the broken windows, and a demolition team “watches the clock.” In the second passage, we learn that the Parker-Morris Building is going to be demolished in “ten minutes.” Both passages relay the same event, which is the impending destruction of the Parker-Morris building. However, perhaps the most telling connection between the passages is the similarity in present tense. Both passages see Joe “tongue” the gun while Tyler and Joe “are” up on top of the Parker-Morris building. From these textual parallels, it appears evident that both passages find themselves in the narrative now, or the primary fabula, which is minimal in Fight Club, only taking up a little more than two chapters (1, half of 29, and 30) in a thirty-chapter novel.

At the start of the embedded fabula, in chapter 2, Joe claims that “Big Bob’s arms were closed around to hold me inside,” and “I was squeezed in the dark between Bob’s new sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God’s as big” (16). In the second passage that describes Joe and Tyler on top of the Parker-Morris building (located in the primary fabula), we see the present tense “are” as compared to the past tense “were” in chapter 2. Although the use of both past and present tense is seen between chapters 2 and the first half of 29, this can be attributed to the narrative now focalization of Joe as cf and the narrative then narration of Joe as cn.

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142 Bal, Narratology (1997), 54. The embedded text takes up the larger part of the book. The primary fabula is minimal because the number of events is small. The relationship between the fabulas is explanatory.
This concept can be further elucidated in terms of the various levels of narration. The narration of the older, on Joe is the first level of narration, which I indicate as cn1. At times, in the embedded fabula, Joe’s narration on the first level is temporarily yielded to cf Joe who becomes the speaker at the second level, which I indicate as cn2. In other words, both fabula’s are narrated in past tense, first level speech by the older Joe. Yet, in addition, the embedded fabula contains the present tense, second level speech of Joe the younger Joe who focalizes the events. The fact that both present and past tense are seen in the embedded fabula can be attributed to the chronological disparities between the narrative now first level speech of cn1 Joe, and the narrative then second level speech of cn2 Joe. The consistency of the present tense, narrative now first level speech of the older, narrating Joe (in chapters 1, half of 29, and all of 30) is the most obvious chronological distinction between the primary and the embedded fabulas.

It appears that the simplest explanation to this chronological deviation is that chapter 2 presents the reader with the beginning of an anachrony, which is a difference between the arrangement in the story and the chronology of the fabula. There are two types of anachronies: retroversions and anticipations. Retroversions convey events in the past, whereas anticipations convey events in the future (Bal 1997: 83). However, the anachrony that is presented here cannot be presented in a line or even a paragraph of the text. This particular anachrony begins on page 16 of chapter 2 and encompasses a rather significant portion of the text. Therefore, the embedded fabula is an anachrony that takes the form of an extended retroversion. An extended retroversion occurs when an anachrony intervenes in the primary fabula and the events presented in the anachrony lie in the past. Moreover, the anachrony takes up a considerable amount of text, rather than just a line or a single paragraph, and may include anachronies of its own.

It looks as if, in chapter one, Palahniuk has employed a rather conventional construction of the novel by beginning it in medias res. In this case, he has immersed the reader somewhere in the middle of the primary fabula. Chapter 2, however, marks the beginning of an extended retroversion that continues through chapter 29 (halfway through page 203). Through the use of anachrony, the reader is referred back into Joe’s recent past until the last two chapters where the reader picks up with him and Tyler on top of the Parker-Morris building. So, Joe’s claim (the last line of text in chapter 1) that he “remembers everything,” signals to the reader that a retroversion is about to occur. It is this extended retroversion that includes the preponderance of the narrative and presents an embedded fabula that does not determine the primary fabula, but rather merely explains it. Joe’s situation presented in the first chapter is unchangeable, and the fact that he tells his story in the form of an embedded fabula in the narrative then is of no influence on the outcome of the primary fabula. However, this mechanism – one that presents the reader with an embedded fabula in the form of an extended reversion – provides a great deal of insight into Joe, the novel’s anti-hero protagonist.

**Multiple Personality Disorder: Joe and Tyler**

Before exploring the more specific narratological functions of our anti-hero protagonist, I must first examine Joe in relation to his intriguing alter ego, Tyler. Tyler is a part of Joe in that he represents a manifestation that springs from the mind of Joe who most likely suffers from a rare form of schizophrenia known as multiple personality disorder (MPD).¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Schizophrenia Digest (glossary online) accessed 1 July 2005, http://www.schizophreniadigest.com/index.php/SC what: “Schizophrenia: a form of psychotic disorder or psychosis, meaning it is a disorder that causes people to have difficulty interpreting reality. Individuals develop a marked change in their thinking, perceptions, and behavior as evidenced by
Even though Tyler and Joe are presented as different characters in the story, they are two sides of the same person. I have selected Joe, and not Tyler, as the source of this MPD because Joe is the narrative’s anti-hero protagonist and character-bound narrator. The following passage subtly anticipates the eventual revelation that Joe and Tyler are, indeed, two different personalities located within the same mind:

I already know which bars are the fight club bars. I ask, have they seen a guy named Tyler Durden. It’s stupid to ask if they know about fight club. The first rule of fight club is you don’t talk about fight club. But have they seen Tyler Durden? They say, never heard of him, sir. But you might find him in Chicago, sir. I must be the hole in my cheek, everyone calls me sir. And they wink. You wake up at O’Hare and take the shuttle into Chicago. Set your watch ahead an hour. If you can wake up in a different place. If you can wake up in a different time. Why can’t you wake up in a different person? (157).

Everywhere Joe goes it appears that Tyler has already traveled that ground. When he inquires if these men have seen Tyler Durden, they claim to have never heard of him and suggest that he look for Tyler in specific places like Chicago while they wink and call him “sir.”

At this point in the embedded fabula (chapter 21), Joe is searching for a missing Tyler in all the fight clubs of the cities that, coincidentally, happen to be the same cities he travels to for his job as a recall campaign coordinator. The following passage informs us that the man who Joe addresses thinks it is some kind of test of secrecy, which is a prerequisite for membership in a fight club:

The bar is empty, and the bartender says, “Welcome back, sir.” I’ve never been to this bar, ever, ever before. I ask if he knows the name Tyler Durden. The bartender grins with his chin stuck out above the top of the white neck brace and asks, “Is this a test?” Yeah, I say, it’s a test. Has he ever met with Tyler Durden? “You stopped in last week, Mr. Durden,” he says. “Don’t you remember?” Tyler was here. “You were here, sir.” I’ve never been here before tonight. “If you say so, sir,” the bartender says, “but Thursday night, you came in to ask how soon the police were planning to shut us down.” Last Thursday night, I was awake all night with the insomnia, wondering was I awake, was I sleeping. I woke up late Friday morning, bone tired and feeling I hadn’t ever had my eyes closed (158).

While feigning ignorance to pass the test, they subtly let him know that they are aware he “is” Tyler Durden. The anticipatory capacity of the first passage is best indicated by the more overt revelation found in the last three sentences of the second passage, which presents the concept of waking up as a different person. The latter passage presents the reader with the first time Joe is referred to directly as Tyler Durden: “You
stopped in last week, Mr. Durden.” In this case, the antecedent of the pronoun “you” is Joe, although the bartender believes he is speaking to “Mr. Durden.”

This disclosure begins to more clearly reveal what had been anticipated several times throughout the preceding chapters, and that is that Joe is Tyler. What is more, the last two sentences of this particular passage reveal the practical dynamic of Joe’s multiple personality disorder. It appears that while Joe believes he is struggling with insomnia (which he is), he is really becoming Tyler. Joe is tired the next day not only because he has been awake all night, but also because he has been acting as Tyler. “Every time you fall asleep,” Tyler says, “I run off and do something wild, something crazy, something completely out of my mind” (163).

The revelation that Joe and Tyler are one and the same person is further evidenced in the following two examples:


I ask what did Tyler do about it. “What did we do about it,” Tyler says. We called an Assault Committee meeting. “There isn’t a me and a you anymore.” Tyler says, and he pinches the end of my nose. “I think you’ve figured that out.” We both use the same body, but at different times (164).

In both passages, the antecedent of the pronoun “you” is Tyler, or Mr. Durden. In the second passage, the antecedent of the pronoun “we” is Joe and Tyler and it is Tyler who is speaking. It is this manipulation of language that offers the most glaring textual clue that, although they are constructed as two separate characters in the narrative, the other characters see only one person.

In addition, the stylistic use of both direct and indirect discourse also serves to indicate the conjoining of two characters within the corporeal presence of one actor. Whenever direct discourse occurs in the text, it is as if the narrator temporarily transfers the function of “spokesperson” to an actor in the fabula (Bal 1997: 8). Moreover, the attributive signs of quotation marks indicate this transference. Indirect discourse is when the narrator represents the words of the actor as it is supposed to have uttered them (Bal 1997: 48). For example, seen in the second passage above, at some points Tyler speaks in direct discourse (“What did we do about it”) as an actor in the fabula. At other times Joe, as narrator, speaks for Tyler (“We use the same body, but at different times”) through indirect discourse, which is further indicative of the fact that Joe is able to speak for Tyler because he “is” Tyler. With this in mind, on Joe’s comment: “The first fight club was just Tyler and I punching each other,” takes on its true meaning in retrospect.

Joe: Triple Narrative Agency

As we have seen, although Joe and Tyler are the same (corporeal) person, they are developed as separate characters in the story. However, it is Joe, like Clockwork’s Alex, who functions as Fight Club’s protagonist anti-hero, character-bound focalizer, and character-bound narrator as “I” is identified with a character in the fabulas he narrates. It is Joe who retains status as character-bound narrator both in the primary fabula told in the narrative now and the embedded fabula relayed in the narrative then.

Joe’s function as focalizer is two-fold. Joe serves as internal focalizer in the embedded fabula and as an external focalizer (as character-bound narrator) in both the primary and embedded fabulas. As an internal and external focalizer (subject of
focalization), he serves as the point from which the elements in both fabulas are viewed. Although at times the external focalization of cn Joe is yielded to other characters in the embedded fabula, it is Joe who provides the preponderance of focalization. As a result, the reader is given the general impression of an objective narration, since events are rarely presented from the other characters' point of view. Joe's bias as both internal and external focalizer is not absent, but remains implicit since there is no such thing as absolute "objectivity."

As noted earlier, Fight Club comprises both a primary and an embedded fabula. In this case, the embedded fabula explains the primary one. It is the nature of Joe's function as it relates to these two fabulas that is the key concern here. With this in mind, I first examine Joe's function in the primary fabula, which is told in the narrative now and exhibits a minimal narrative distance between the narrating "I" and the experiencing "I" (both called Joe):

I tongue the barrel into my cheek and say, you want to be a legend, Tyler, man, I'll make you a legend. I've been here from the beginning (15).

Can't I see how we're all manifestations of God's love? I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God's got this all wrong (207).

Both passages – taken from opposite ends of the primary fabula – display Joe's function as cf, cn, and actor. Although it is yielded at times, it is Joe who provides the lion's share of the focalization in the narrative. However, another type of focalization presents itself when Joe's internal focalization is "shared" with Tyler. In this case, shared focalization is not necessarily double focalization, which occurs when the external focalizer looks over the shoulder of the internal character-bound focalizer (Bal 1997: 159). Rather, shared focalization is when one internal focalizer is really two characters in the story simultaneously, as the following passage demonstrates:

Tyler and me at the edge of the roof, the gun in my mouth, I'm wondering how clean the gun is. We just totally forget about Tyler's whole murder-suicide thing while we watch another file cabinet slip out the side of the building and the drawers roll open midair, reams of white paper caught in the updraft and carried off on the wind (13).

Although Joe's MPD has yet to be revealed in the embedded fabula, this example of shared focalization is an early textual clue that Joe and Tyler are two sides of the same person. The fact that Joe and Tyler are the antecedents for the pronoun "we" takes on special significance when we finally learn that Joe and Tyler share the same body, which makes their shared focalization plausible as they watch a file cabinet slip off the edge of the building.

In the embedded fabula, cn Joe continues to function as an external focalizer of events. However, as a cn who relays events in the narrative then, Joe's function as focalizer takes on a more overtly external dimension. Narrating events in the embedded fabula in the form of an extended retroversion, the narrative distance has increased and the autobiographical nature of cn Joe's narration becomes more apparent. Due to this increased narrative distance, in the embedded fabula it is more apparent when cn Joe yields the first level of focalization to various internal focalizers on the second level, which include himself as cf "I": 145

145 Bal, Narratology (1997), 158. Bal assumes that there is: "a first level of focalization (F1) at which the focalizer is external. This external focalizer delegates focalization to an internal focalizer, the focalizer on the second level (F2). In principle, there are more levels possible."
I pick up the phone, and it's Tyler, and he says, "Go outside, there's some guys waiting for you in the parking lot." I ask, who are they? "They're all waiting," Tyler says. I smell gasoline on my hands. Marla would go to bars and hear the bartender calling her name, and when she took the call the line was dead. At the time, she thought this was hitting bottom. "When you're twenty-four," Marla says, "you have no idea how far you can really fall, but I was a fast learner" (109).

His eyes go side to side across the paper, and he giggles. "The second rule of fight club is you don't talk about fight club." I hear Tyler's words come out of my boss, Mister Boss with his midlife spread and family photo on his desk and his dreams about early retirement and winters spent at a trailer-park hookup in some Arizona desert (96).

Seen in the embedded fabula, the preceding passages provide examples of internal, character-bound focalization as the external focalization of cn Joe yields to the internal focalization of cf Joe, Marla, and Mister Boss. In the first two passages, the verbs "smell," "hear," and "thought" function as explicit attributive signs that signal the transference of focalization from the first to the second level. In the third passage, the shift in focalization from cn Joe to Mister Boss is merely implied by our entrance into his dreams. It is important to note the frequency of such shifts because there is a correlation between their frequency and the reader's perception of the narrative. In other words, the greater regularity of such shifts tends to call into question the narrative's appearance of objectivity.

Types of Destruction

In order to concretize a story that articulates a fabula(s) which conceptualizes the notion of salvation through destruction in the context of the lord - bondsman relationship and Hegel's concept of an understanding self-consciousness, the depths of Fight Club's destructive violence must be fully plumbed. Implied denotatively, violence often manifests itself in some type of physical destruction. Therefore, for the purpose of this discussion, I use violence and destruction interchangeably in a textual investigation that ultimately assists in the attempt to flesh-out the notion of salvation through destruction.

In this section, I image the three different types of destructive behavior displayed in Fight Club. There are two types of violence directed at the human body, while a third kind is aimed at the physical structure of society itself. The first, rather unique type of violence is directed at one's own body and is seen when Joe performs violence against himself: "The first fight club was just Tyler and I pounding each other" (49). Here, it is not really Tyler who punches Joe, but Joe (as Tyler) who punches himself. This type of self-inflicted violence is also demonstrated in the following passage when Joe (as Tyler) burns himself:

Tyler's saliva did two jobs. The wet kiss on the back of my hand held the flakes of lye while they burned. That was the first job. The second was lye only burns when you combine it with water. Or saliva. "This is a chemical burn," Tyler said, "and it will hurt more than you've ever been burned" (74).

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146 Bal, Narratology (1997), 158: "...markers in shifts in level we call 'attributive signs.' These are signs which indicate the shift from one level to another. These signs can remain implicit."

147 American Heritage College Dictionary (2002), 1531: "Violence: physical force exerted for the purposes of violating, damaging, or abusing: the act or an instance of violent action or behavior."
Although slightly different, the next passage also presents violence aimed at oneself. In this case, Joe describes how one might incite some anonymous individual to assault the provoker:

The idea is to take some Joe on the street who’s never been in a fight and recruit him. Let him experience winning for the first time in his life. Get him to explode. Give him permission to beat the crap out of you (120).

Here, the material instrument of self-destruction becomes a person other than oneself. In this case, a stranger roused to violent behavior by one who intends to receive it.

In order to provide a kind of organized arena for self-destruction, Joe and Tyler create underground fight clubs that sanction and govern the second type of violent destruction, which is also aimed at the human body, but is directed outwardly at another human being:

You saw the kid who works in the copy center, a month ago you saw this kid who can’t remember to three-hole-punch an order or put colored slip sheets between the copy packets, but this kid was a god for ten minutes when you saw him kick the air out of an account representative twice his size then land on the man and pound him limp until the kid had to stop, or goes limp, even if he’s just taking it, the fight is over (48).

I held the face of mister angel like a baby or a football in the crook of my arm and bashed him with my knuckles, bashed him until his teeth broke through his lips. Bashed him with my elbow after that until he fell through my arms into a heap at my feet. Until the skin was pounded thin across his cheekbones and turned black (124).

The first passage relates an example of two anonymous members of fight club, and the second depicts Joe’s savage beating of “angel” who also a member. While the violence is directed outwardly in both cases, it maintains the same function, which is to achieve a kind of freedom from the numbing effects of the consumer culture through the “real” experience of pain. This real pain stands in contrast to its commodified, substandard duplicate, which is epitomized in such events as a televised football game. The “realness” of the fight club violence helps inject these men—who have been anesthetized by consumerism—with a sensation of life. Every time they fight, they are further removed from the sedation of modern society and positioned closer to an elevated degree of enlightenment by risking one’s life. They use each other as oppositions to achieve a higher level of self-consciousness.

The last type of violence involves “Project Mayhem.” Project Mayhem (Tyler’s creation) is carried out by fight club members who are divided up into committees such as Arson, Mischief, and Assault (119). Project Mayhem was designed to create widespread chaos within mainstream society in order to overthrow it: “This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and right-away destruction of civilization” (125). In order to reach this goal, each committee was responsible for particular types of destructive acts aimed at emblematic societal structures. Although the following passages provide only a small cross-section of the Project’s activities, a wide range of destruction is exhibited. For example, members of the particular

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148 Palahniuk, Fight Club (1996), 50: “Fight club is not football on television. You aren’t watching a bunch of men you don’t know halfway around the world beating on each other live by satellite with a two-minute delay. commercials pitching beer every ten minutes, and a pause now for station identification.”
committees might be involved in the trivial, somewhat humorous act of tipping over a portable toilet or throwing gelatin or the much more serious attempt to raze a skyscraper. The following passage demonstrates the former, more humorous type of destruction aimed at calling attention to consumerism as it is represented in mainstream culture:

If you draw a proposal, then you have to go to the import beer festival this weekend and push over a guy in a chemical toilet. You’ll get extra favor if you get beat up for doing this. Or you have to attend the fashion show at the shopping center atrium and throw strawberry gelatin from the mezzanine (120).

However, as the fabula progresses, the activities of Project Mayhem ramp up as they grow more ambitious and more violent:

Who painted the blazing demon mask on the Hein Tower? The night of the Hein Tower assignment, you can picture a team of law clerks and bookkeepers or messengers sneaking into offices where they sat, every day. Maybe they were a little drunk even if it’s against the rules in Project Mayhem, and they used passkeys where they could and used spray canisters of Freon to shatter lock cylinders so they could dangle, rappelling against the tower’s brick faced, dropping, trusting each other to hold ropes, swinging, risking death in offices where every day they felt their lives end one hour at a time (121).

Here, unnamed fight club members illegally enter a skyscraper in order to deface the outside of it with a massive “demon mask.” Intending to gain publicity for their cause, the act, while unlawful, was still rather innocent compared to the culmination of Project Mayhem. Seen at the conclusion of the embedded fabula, they attempt to not merely deface a skyscraper, but rather annihilate it completely:

The building we’re standing on won’t be here in ten minutes. You take a 98-percent concentration of fuming nitric acid and add the acid to three times that amount of sulfuric acid. Do this in an ice bath. Then add glycerin drop-by-drop with an eyedropper. You have nitroglycerin. (...) The Parker-Morris Building will go over, all one hundred and ninety-one floors, slow as a tree falling the forest. Timber. You can topple anything. It’s weird to think the place where we’re standing will only be a point in the sky (12-13).

Although there is no such corporate entity named “Parker-Morris,” the name closely resembles “Phillip-Morris,” which is a multi-national corporation based in the U.S. With this point in view, Tyler’s desire to destroy the Parker-Morris headquarters is a likely metaphor for the demolition of the corporate power structure that exists behind American consumerism. Although Fight Club was published two years prior, Project Mayhem’s attempt to depose a consumer society — imaged metaphorically through the destruction of its symbols — conjures pictures of the “9-11” attacks on New York City’s World Trade Center. This ironic association may tend to accentuate the gravity of Fight Club’s third and most destructive type of violence in the minds of readers familiar with the 9-11 images.

Functions of Destruction

The previous section introduced three types of destructive violence: violence directed at oneself, violence aimed at others, and the violent destruction of property as emblems of
a consumer society. In this section, the function, or purpose, of these types will be further illuminated as they relate to the concept of self-destruction. The function of the first and most obvious type, self-inflicted violence, is demonstrated in the following two passages:

The first fight club was just Tyler and I pounding each other. It used to be when I came home angry and knowing my life wasn’t toeing my five-year plan, I could clean my condominium or detail my car. Someday I’d be dead without a scar and there would be a really nice condo and car. Really, really, nice until the dust settled or the next owner. Nothing is static. Even the Mona Lisa is falling apart. Since fight club, I can wiggle half the teeth in my jaw. Maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer. Tyler never knew his father. Maybe self-destruction is the answer (49).

I didn’t want to, but Tyler explained it all, about not wanting to die without any scars, about being tired of watching only professionals fight, and wanting to know more about myself. About self-destruction. At the time, my life just seemed too complete, and maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves (52).

In the first passage, we learn that Joe is physically “pounding” himself (as Tyler) because he is discontented with the material returns of modern life. Since self-improvement in the form of material possessions and professional success has proven unsatisfying, the second passage conveys Joe’s willingness to heed his alter-ego’s suggestion of self-destruction in an attempt to “make something better” out of himself. In order to accomplish this, Tyler believes Joe should not only run from money, property, and knowledge, but also intentionally seek disaster. In other words, Tyler wants Joe to “hit bottom”:

Tyler says I’m nowhere near hitting bottom, yet. And if I don’t fall all the way, I can’t be saved. Jesus did it with his crucifixion thing. I shouldn’t just abandon money and property and knowledge. This isn’t just a weekend retreat. I should run from self-improvement, and I should be running toward disaster. I can’t just play it safe anymore. This isn’t a seminar. “If you’ve lost your nerve before you hit bottom,” Tyler says, “you’ll never really succeed.” Only after disaster can we be resurrected. “It’s only after you’ve lost everything,” Tyler says, “that you’re free to do anything” (69-70).

Tyler’s assertion that it is “It’s only after you’ve lost everything” that we are “free to do anything” echoes Hegel’s argument that it is “solely by risking life that freedom is obtained” (1977: 114). Tyler analogizes the idea of salvation through destruction in his comparison between hitting bottom and Jesus’ crucifixion. Tyler further emphasizes the gravity of this exercise when he notes that it is not just abandoning our possessions and assumptions, but also seeking out private disaster. In other words, it is only through our personal crucifixion that we can be resurrected as a kind of Hegelian understanding self-consciousness. In the next passage, Tyler demonstrates exactly how he is going to assist Joe in this process:

“Open your eyes,” Tyler says, and his face is shining with tears. “Congratulations,” Tyler says. “You’re a step closer to hitting bottom. “You have to see,” Tyler says, “how the first soap was made of heroes.” Think about the animals used in product testing. Think about the monkeys shot into space. “Without their death, their pain, their sacrifice,” Tyler says, “we would have nothing” (78).
Here, Tyler kisses Joe’s hand so that a small quantity of saliva is left on it. He then pours lye onto the saliva and the mixture induces an excruciating chemical burn. It is during this painful, self-induced experience that Tyler explains to Joe how the first soap was produced. Soap— a most practical innovation— was discovered by accident through actual human sacrifice. In this same way, as the lye burns through his skin, Tyler wants Joe to “give up.” to surrender and metaphorically lay his old life on that same altar of human sacrifice so that something positive may ultimately result. Like the animals sacrificed to make products safer or to explore space, Tyler wants Joe to sacrifice his attachment to the comforts of modern life and hit bottom because, as Hegel argued, authentic self-consciousness stems from the readiness to forfeit everything, which includes one’s life.  

Although it is directed towards others, the second type of violence is similar to the function of the first in its attempt to initiate a chain of events that would cause someone to hit bottom. The connection between the two types of violence is demonstrated in the following passage:

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

Here, Joe equates fight club to a church where one goes to get “saved,” which reinforces the notion of violence as a way to shed the numbing effects of consumer culture. By beating each other up, the members of fight club assist each other in self-destruction and, in doing so, they enable one another to hit bottom so that they may, paradoxically, achieve a kind of salvation. The next passage displays an instance of this ironic assistance, or what Tyler refers to as a “human sacrifice”:

I have your license. I know who you are. I know where you live. I’m keeping your license, and I’m going to check on you, mister Raymond K. Hessel. In three months, and then in six months, and then in a year, and if you aren’t back in school on your way to being a veterinarian, you will be dead (154).

Each member of fight club is responsible for carrying out a dozen of these pseudo-altruistic, quasi-violent acts. The life that each one of these individuals symbolically sacrifices at gunpoint is the life they have, for whatever reason, “settled for.” In other words, they have surrendered their true ambitions. In light of this forfeiture, with a gun pressed against their head, they are instructed to pursue the life they have always desired, but for some reason have been unable to acquire. Tyler believes that only when the old, settled for life is sacrificed, can true happiness be achieved. Joe supports Tyler’s view when he states: “Raymond K.K. Hessel, your dinner is going to taste better than any meal you’ve ever eaten, and tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of your entire life” (155).

However, such pseudo-altruistic assistance eventually goes too far and morphs into a form of self-seeking catharsis. In the following passage, Joe savagely beats an

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140 Hegel, *Phenomenology* (1977), 114: “The individual who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness.”
attractive young member of fight club referred to as “angel,” who signifies “everything beautiful” Joe would never have:

That Saturday night, a young guy with an angel’s face came to his first fight club, and I tagged him for a fight. That’s the rule. If it’s your first night in fight club, you have to fight. I knew that so I tagged him because insomnia was on again, and I was in a mood to destroy something beautiful. (...) Tyler asked what I was really fighting. What Tyler says about being the crap and the slaves of history, that’s how I felt. I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I’d never have. (...) I wanted the whole world to hit bottom. Pounding that kid, I really wanted to put a bullet between the eyes of every endangered panda that wouldn’t screw to save its species and every whale or dolphin that gave up and ran itself aground. Don’t think of this as extinction. Think of this as downsizing. For thousands of years, human beings had screwed up and crapped on this planet, and now history expected me to clean up after everyone (123-124).

Instead of consciously trying to help angel hit bottom, Joe merely used him to vent the frustrations that have resulted from his personal emptiness and dissatisfaction with the “way of the world.” It was also in this same moment that Joe felt most unsatisfied and the escape that fight club had previously provided him was left wanting:

I said I felt like crap and not relaxed at all. I didn’t get any kind of a buzz. Maybe I’d developed a jones. You can build up a tolerance to fighting, and maybe I needed to move on to something bigger. It was that morning, Tyler invented Project Mayhem” (123).

Angel not only represented everything beautiful Joe would never have, but also modern society, which promises a life of ease and happiness. However, in Joe’s case, it could not deliver the contentment and satisfaction it had pledged. As a result of fight club’s failure to sustain personal catharsis, Project Mayhem – aimed at the demolition of the consumer society – is born.

While Project Mayhem concerns destruction on a grand scale, it was anticipated by Joe’s destruction of his own property. The following passage provides insight into Joe’s sense of confinement, which eventually causes him to turn against his belongings:

You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple of years you’re satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you’ve got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you (44).

Instead of feeling satisfied, Joe felt trapped by the possessions that were promised (by a consumer culture) to make him complete; however, Joe could not escape his material prison on his own. Joe required Tyler’s assistance, which is anticipated in the next passage when Joe first expresses his desire for Tyler to “deliver” him from such material trappings as Swedish furniture and clever art:

The doorman raises an eyebrow and says how some people will go on a long trip and leave a candle, a long, long candle burning in a big puddle of gasoline. People with financial difficulties do this stuff. People who want out from under. I asked to use the lobby phone. “A lot of young people try to impress the world and buy too many things,” the doorman said. I called Tyler. The phone rang in
Tyler’s rented house on Paper Street. Oh, Tyler, please deliver me. And the phone rang. “Young people, they think they want the whole world.” Deliver me from Swedish furniture. Deliver me from clever art. And the phone rang and Tyler answered. “If you don’t know what you want,” the doorman said, “you end up with a lot you don’t.” May I never be complete. May I never be content (45-46).

Here, the doorman indicates to the reader why Joe destroyed his own condominium when he states that some who do this type of thing are young people who “try to impress the world and buy too many things” and who “want out from under.” In Joe’s case, he endeavored to escape his prison by physically destroying it. However, because he could not do this on his own, Joe subconsciously invented Tyler, or his lacerated consciousness, to do it for him:

“Disaster is a natural part of my evolution,” Tyler whispered, “toward tragedy and dissolution.” I told the detective that it was the refrigerator that blew up my condo. “I’m breaking my attachment to physical power and possessions,” Tyler whispered. “because only through destroying myself can I discover the greater power of my spirit.” (…) “The liberator who destroys my property,” Tyler said, “is fighting to save my spirit. The teacher who clears all possessions from my path will set me free” (110).

It is Tyler who is able to articulate the Hegelian impetus behind the explosion when he whispers: “I’m breaking my attachment to physical power and possessions” because “only through destroying myself can I discover the great power of my spirit.”150 Like the first two types of violence, the destruction of property is intended to liberate Joe so that his spirit may be saved. In other words, the above passage links the destruction of property to the destruction of the self and the destruction of the self to its salvation.

Project Mayhem – while certainly the destruction of property – is more concerned with a macrocosmic liberation of the masses from an oppressive consumer society than with a more microcosmic liberation of an individual member of fight club. At first, Project Mayhem aims to terrorize the snobbish aristocracy:

Tyler and me, we’ve turned into the guerilla terrorists of the service industry. Dinner party saboteurs. The hotel caters dinner parties, and when somebody wants the food they get the food and the wine and the china and the glassware and the waiters. They get the works, all on one bill. And because they know they can’t threaten you with the tip, to them you’re just a cockroach (81).

At this stage, Project Mayhem merely endeavors to disrupt the lives of those who best signify the consumer society they sought to escape.151 The following passage reinforces the notion of Project Mayhem as a form of class warfare when Tyler and the other members of fight club issue a rather stern warning to the chief of police not to shut any fight clubs down:

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150 Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (1996), 149: “Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don’t need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don’t really need.”

151 Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (1996), 79-85. Tyler, who works for a ritzy banquet service company, often defiles the food he is about to serve. For example, he urinates in the soup and passes gas on the meringue. In addition, he urinates into one of the many perfume bottles of the rich owner of one of the homes entertaining one of the banquets he attends. Since the lady does not know which one, he has effectively ruined them all.
“Remember this,” Tyler said. “The people you’re trying to step on, we’re everyone you depend on. We’re the people who do your laundry and cook your food and serve your dinner. We make your bed. We guard you while you’re asleep. We drive the ambulances. We direct your call. We are cooks and taxi drivers and we know everything about you. We process your insurance claims and credit card charges. We control every part of your life. We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we’ll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won’t. And we’re just learning this fact,” Tyler said. “So don’t fuck with us” (166).

By establishing the binary opposition of the “we” and the “you,” this passage conveys Tyler’s rather fervent sense of class division. To put this separation in Hegelian terms, without the bondsman, there would be no lord.

With this connection in view, we learn that Project Mayhem is most sardonically funded by the fat stolen from plastic surgery clinics. “Fat,” the mechanic says is: “...liposuctioned fat sucked out of the richest thighs in America. The richest, fattest thighs in the world” (150). Used to make soap, the stolen fat is rendered, mixed with lye and rosemary, and sold back to the people who paid to have it sucked out at twenty dollars a bar. The mocking tone of this passage develops Palahniuk’s thematic condemnation of those who best represent the vain, materialistic consumer culture in which the narrative is set. In order to abolish this rampant materialism, the following passage reveals Project Mayhem’s evolution from terrorizing those who signify consumer society to that society’s ultimate annihilation:

This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and right-away destruction of civilization. (...) Like fight club does with clerks and box boys, Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world (125).

Here, Tyler applies his “only after you’ve lost everything” that we are “free to do anything” theory to the larger civilization. To put it differently, for the collective community of bondsmen to be free, the opposing lord-like other of consumer society must be eliminated so civilization itself could only be resurrected and achieve a kind of collective understanding consciousness.

This objective culminates with the destruction of massive skyscrapers like the Parker-Morris Building, which symbolize the corporate structure that supports consumer, capitalistic societies such as the United States. The implication is that such societies cannot be merely “fixed,” but must be fully removed so that another, supposedly better one, may form in its stead. However, Tyler fails to recognize that only the bondsman can transcend the fear, or the initial response to the otherness as embodied in the lord. While a kind of self-consciousness is initially achieved in opposition to otherness, a higher version is obtained “in” the otherness.152 Hegel argues that it is not the mastery of the other, but identifying it and yielding to it. In other words, it is consciously subjecting oneself to the other that results in an understanding consciousness, which Joe (bondsman) finally achieves in his subjection to Tyler (lord) at the end of the primary fabula on top of the Parker-Morris building when he does not shoot Tyler, but rather himself (196).

152 Hegel, Phenomenology (1977), 118: “In the master, the bondsman feels self-existence to be something external, and objective fact: in fear self-existence is present within himself; in fashioning the thing, self-existence comes to be felt explicitly as his own proper being, and he attains the consciousness that he himself exists in its own right and on its own account.”
Literary Space and Implied Temporal Derivatives

All of the fabula events – whether they are in soaring skyscrapers or dingy basement fight clubs – occur within degrees of describable literary space, which maintain the capacity to manipulate the reader’s understanding of the fabula elements and resulting interpretation of the story. In chapter three, the reader accompanies Joe as he commutes to and from the airports that serve the cities he visits as a function of his job as recall campaign coordinator for an anonymous major car manufacturer:

You wake up at Air Harbor International. (…) This is how I met Tyler Durden. You wake up at O’Hare. You wake up at LaGuardia. (…) You wake up at Sea-Tac. (…) You wake up at LAX. (…) You wake up at Cleveland Hopkins. (…) (25-31).

From the number of various airports Joe names it is readily apparent that Fight Club’s first degree, or largest degree of literary space is the United States; all of the airports Joe travels to serve such American cities as Chicago, New York, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Cleveland. The second degree of literary space, the specific city in which Joe resides, is left a bit more ambiguous. This unnamed metropolis is home to Joe’s high-rise apartment building and (although it is non-existent) the Parker-Morris building, which Joe describes as the “world’s tallest” (12). For that reason, Fight Club’s second degree of literary space is most likely one of the major American cities Joe flies to on business such as Chicago or New York.

The smaller, second degree of literary space generally consists of the different rooms the principal characters work and live in. Palahniuk takes special care to describe the homes of the Joe, Tyler, and Marla in detail. In Fight Club this second, more thoroughly described degree of literary space is used as a form of implicit narratorial characterization. It becomes evident over the course of the narrative that places of residence do, indeed, say something about the characters that inhabit them. For example, the following passage describes Joe’s high-rise condominium building:

Home was a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals. The marketing brochure promised a foot of concrete floor, ceiling, and wall between me and any adjacent stereo or turned-up television. A foot of concrete and air conditioning, you couldn’t open the windows so even with maple flooring and dimmer switches, all seventeen hundred airtight feet would smell like the last meal you cooked or your last trip to the bathroom (41).

Here, such a description images Joe’s residence as an architecturally sterile, presumably lonely place mostly inhabited by young, white-collar singles and widows. The sterility and seclusion of his residence is merely a physical manifestation of the isolation that marks Joe’s consumer lifestyle.

Along with his condo, we are also supplied with added textual details in regard to his place of employment. Similar to his condo, the department of Compliance and Liability is described with a touch of sterility:

That’s my department. Compliance and Liability. (…) It’s not like I have a window at work. All the outside walls are floor to ceiling glass. Everything where I work is floor to ceiling glass. Everything is vertical blinds. Everything is industrial

Jahn, Poems, Plays, and Prose (2001), N7.5: “Characters are implicitly characterized by their clothing, their physical appearance, and their chosen environment (e.g., their rooms, their dogs, their cars).”
low-pile gray carpet spotted with little tombstone monuments where the PCs plug into the network. Everything is a maze of cubicles boxed in with fences of upholstered plywood. A vacuum cleaner hums somewhere (138).

Analogous to the "filing cabinet" high-rise, Joe's office is "a maze of cubicles." In both cases, the details give the impression of a mentally stifling, claustrophobic space in spite of their physical size.

Tyler's house, on the other hand, is a picture of thorough decrepitude as the dwelling, like Tyler, is in a complete state of disrepair:

The house that Tyler rents, it has three stories and a basement. We carry around candles. It has pantries and screened sleeping porches and stained glass windows on the stairway landing. There are bay windows with window seats in the parlor. The baseboard moldings are carved and varnished and eighteen inches high. The rain trickles down through the house, and everything wooden swells and shrinks, and the nails in everything wooden, the floors and baseboards and window casings, the nails inch out and rust. Everywhere there are rusted nails to step on or snag your elbow on... (57).

From Joe's description, it appears that it was, at one time, a fine home constructed with stained glass and a parlor. Whatever it once was, the house is now not only appallingly dilapidated, but quite dangerous as well. Just like Joe's sterile apartment, the condition of Tyler's house gives us a glimpse into the anarchical and dangerous character we later discover him to be.

The next two passages circumscribe the residence of the third principal character, Maria Singer, whom Joe meets at a support group meeting for people with brain parasites (34). Despite being physically healthy, the attention and affection Joe receives at these meetings works to eliminate an insomnia that stems from Joe's tedious, unfulfilling consumer lifestyle - until Maria Singer enters the picture. Joe's knowledge that there is another "faker" in the room holds up a mirror to his own lie and his provisional solution is ruined and his insomnia returns. Maria's hotel residence is presented as a kind of amalgamation of the two previous dwellings:

Maria lives at the Regent Hotel, which is nothing but brown bricks held together with sleaze, where all the mattresses are sealed inside slippery plastic covers, so many people go there to die (58).

Maria's room in the seedy Regent Hotel effectively assimilates the oppressive emptiness of Joe's condo with the gross disrepair of Tyler's house. Joe not only wanted to escape from his empty lifestyle, but he wanted to be with someone like Maria: "Tyler loved Maria. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me needed a way to be with Maria" (198). Both Maria and her residence supply a kind of balancing middle ground between the polar extremes of Joe and Tyler.

It is through these kinds of descriptive passages that the reader is allowed a sense-based entrance into these characters' lives. Practically, Palahniuk employs these passages as a form of descriptive anticipation. For example, Joe's claustrophobic, mundane surroundings provide impetus for a psychological disorder that, in a sense, frees him from the consumer culture that has imprisoned him. Unable to effectively assist

154 Palahniuk, Fight Club (1996), 23: "To Maria I'm a fake. Since the second night I saw her I can't sleep. (...) Maria's lie reflects my lie." Seeing another "faker" like himself at the support group meeting reminds Joe of the lie he is living, and that his attendance at the meetings is only a superficial solution to a deeper problem.
himself, Joe subconsciously invents his anarchist alter ego whose dilapidated environment is positioned antithetically to Joe’s sterile condominium.

A byproduct inherent in the delineation of literary space is the inference of literary time. Although literary time is not stated explicitly within the text (similar to characterization) it can be implicitly gleaned through the textual description of literary space. In order to circumscribe Fight Club’s presentation of literary time, I refer back to the preceding passages, which inform us that the narrative takes place in a world of modern airports, high-rise condominiums, and skyscraper office buildings filled with cubicles and personal computers. From these details, it is apparent that Fight Club is set sometime in the late twentieth century. Specifically, the widespread use of personal computers in an office replete with cubicles further confirms a sense of literary time circa the novel’s publication – 1996. The previous decade (also known as the “me” generation) is marked historically by the capitalist economic inequality of “Reaganomics.” It is during the 1980’s that the American economy, fueled by consumerism, allowed the affluent to accumulate even greater sums of wealth, which only widened the financial disparity between the classes. Accordingly, it was in the 1990’s that the darker side of this same American consumer culture begins to materialize in the form of widespread third world depravation and corporate scandal. Through description, the particular sense of literary space and time provides an appropriate arena for Fight Club’s thematic treatment of American consumerism.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, in this chapter I analyze the narrative text in an effort to concretize a story, which articulates a fabula that conceptualizes the notion of salvation through destruction in view of Hegelian phenomenology. In particular, it is the dialectic of the lord and the bondsman and its implications on the evolution of self-consciousness that provides a philosophical context for Palahniuk’s novel.

In Fight Club, Joe reflexively projects his subconscious desires into the sensual world in order to establish his subjectivity by a negation from another self-consciousness, which is paradoxically himself (Tyler). Viewed in this way, the novel presents a variation on this Hegelian theme in that Joe’s primary negative relation is not with other individuals, but rather with a mental projection of what he desires to be. What is more, Joe’s need to be someone who owns “Swedish furniture” and “clever art” is conditioned by the sensual world, namely through the advertised images essential to the economic vitality of the consumer culture he inhabits. As a consequence of his conditioned desires, Joe finds that the consumer culture has trapped him in Hegel’s notion of a primitive desiring consciousness, which eventually separates into a mastery or a servant consciousness.

Although Joe has performed his obligations in a kind of capitalist “social contract” – vis-à-vis attending college and procuring a white-collar job – the consumer culture only meets his material needs and the promise of personal fulfillment as a result of


156 Hegel, The Phenomenology of the Spirit (1977) 114-138. The goal is ultimately to reach the level of the “understanding” consciousness when the self sees itself as the great unifying principle.
his actions has gone unmet.\textsuperscript{157} In reaction to this deep dissatisfaction, Joe subconsciously conceives Tyler who exhibits a lacerated consciousness. Tyler is a kind of bohemian who – by employing the tools of culture in opposition to culture – advocates a kind of salvation through self-destruction that evolves into a revolution that requires the obliteration of all major credit card company buildings. He believes that erasing the debt record will equalize the aristocracy with the demos and permit the basic goodness of humans to emerge so that a new utopia may arise. In this way, Tyler sees himself as a “liberator” who fights to “save the human spirit” (1996: 110). However, much like the Reign of Terror that succeeded the French Revolution, the razing of these financial institutions ultimately fails to bring about the idealistic change that Tyler envisions.

Joe, as the bondsman, creates Tyler because he subconsciously wants to be the lord-like figure he signifies, or the revolutionary who can free him from his present consciousness. Joe’s desire is so intense that it manifests in a kind of latent homoeroticism towards Tyler who embodies all the promises of the consumer culture. Echoing Hegel, in The Self (1955), Niebuhr sheds some light on this sexual metaphor of the self in its dialogue with others: “The self sees the other as an instrument for its purposes and as a completion for its incompleteness. The sexual relation is the most vivid form of one self-seeking completion in another self” (31). Niebuhr’s description is made manifest when Joe first imagines meeting Tyler:

\begin{quote}
How I met Tyler was I went to a nude beach. This was the very end of summer, and I was asleep. Tyler was naked and sweating, gritty with sand, his hair wet and stringy, hanging in his face. Tyler had been around a long time before we met (1996: 32).
\end{quote}

This subconscious event anticipates Tyler’s eventual appearance as a character in the story and is indicative of Joe’s intense longing to transcend his present state of consciousness, which he will risk his life to achieve. Joe’s implicit sexual desire for Tyler is predicated upon the failure of another kind of longing, which is his need for the contentment promised by a consumer culture. Evidenced later in the fabula, this aspiration also takes on sexual overtones as Joe’s language implies that he has masturbated to the IKEA furniture catalogue (43). At the root of these sexual desires is a deeper yearning for personal fulfilment that can only be found by stripping away the layers of culturally imposed self-conceptions. However, Joe is unable to break free from his professional consciousness and requires Tyler – the lacerated consciousness – to help him achieve a higher level of understanding consciousness as he finally realizes that he “is” Tyler. As the lord-like other, Tyler provides a Hegelian negative relation that Joe must

\textsuperscript{157} While contract theory can be found in classical political philosophy, the term “social contract” is most closely linked with the modern political philosophers Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, edited by C.B. Macpherson (New York: The Penguin Publishing Group, 1985). For Hobbes, the social contract was an agreement between society and its government. Hobbes contended that people in a state of nature ceded their individual rights to a strong sovereign in return for his protection. John Locke, Two Treatises of Government, edited by Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). In Locke’s formulation, the social contract is between individuals in an orderly state of nature, possessing ‘natural law,’ a moral force limiting contractors as to what they can promise. The area of trust or discretion allowed to those in power is limited by the intentions of those entering society such as the preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates through the establishment of known, binding, and universally applicable laws. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract (New York: The Penguin Publishing Group, 1968). Unlike Hobbes, for Rousseau, the social contract an agreement between individuals to create a society and a government. Like Locke, Rousseau believed that a government should come from the consent of the governed.
“fight” so that he can ultimately realize the true nature his subjectivity and achieve a genuine level of self-realization.

While Joe attains an understanding consciousness through his opposition to Tyler, he never reaches Hegel’s pinnacle of “absolute” consciousness, which does not negate the world, but rather assimilates it and peacefully coexists with it. Furthermore, it brings to its members the social responsibility that comes with wisdom and helps them along to their next stage of consciousness.\footnote{Trejo, “Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind” (1993), 13: “With absolute consciousness one may approach heaven. Love, harmony, wisdom, social responsibility, experience, all converge one consciousness, where one can glimpse the end of time, or the dimension beyond mere appearances, the dimension beyond phenomena. The goal of phenomenology is reached, then, in the transcendence of phenomena and the attainment of Noumena, Geist, Spirit, the Absolute.” Absolute consciousness is exhibited by a love for the phenomenal world and to help each person one meets to their next stage of consciousness.}

Tyler is not the end of Joe’s conscious evolution, but rather, as Joe’s lacerated conscious, a means that allows Joe to see himself through the advertised images that have come to define him. While this is useful – at the conclusion of the fabula as he lies in his hospital bed – Joe seems to have relegated himself to a kind of existential resignation in that there is no other stage higher than he is:

> Why did I cause so much pain? Didn’t I realize that each of us is a scared, unique snowflake of special unique specialness? Can’t I see how we’re all manifestations of God’s love? I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God’s got this all wrong. We are not special. We are not trash, either. We just are. We just are, and what happens just happens (207).

The conclusion, therefore, does not present us with the hope of any further evolution of consciousness; rather, we are left with a kind of static view of the world. This notion is evidenced as Joe further describes his ethereally out-of-body experience:

> People write me in heaven and tell me I’m remembered. That I’m their hero. I’ll get better. (...) Or somebody with a broken nose pushes a mop past me and whispers: everything’s going according to the plan. (...) We’re going to break up civilization and make something better of the world (207-208).

Obviously still in the hospital, we get the sense that Joe’s new level of self-awareness has not penetrated into the other members of fight club and the conclusion gives no indication that he is going to try and change things when he leaves the hospital.

Thus, it seems doubtful that Joe’s understanding consciousness will ever lead to a more absolute consciousness that operates in love for the world and brings others along to their next stage. With this in mind, we must answer the central question: Was Joe saved through destruction? If saved means transcending his servant consciousness and achieving an understanding consciousness by risking his life in the context of the lord – bondsman relationship, then yes. If saved means reaching an absolute consciousness marked by love for others, then no. It is this precisely this idea that I will track into the Fincher film.