Travelling philosophy: from literature to film

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III. The Film

David Fincher

(1962 – Present)
Introduction

In the fall of 1999, 20th Century Fox released the filmic adaptation of Palahniuk’s novel published just two years prior. Unlike Kubrick and Burgess who did not collaborate on the film, David Fincher - director of Seven (1995) and The Game (1997) - and screenwriter Jim Uhls worked closely with Palahniuk throughout pre-production to try and make sure that the film captured the novel’s essential themes of anti-consumerism and a kind of salvation through personal destruction.159

Much like its literary forerunner, the sardonically dark and overtly violent film polarized the audience and critics alike with its scathing examination of American consumerism. With a production budget of 63 million dollars, the film earned a rather disappointing 37 million dollars in the United States despite featuring three of Hollywood’s biggest stars - Brad Pitt, Edward Norton, and Helena Bonham Carter.160 Although the film quickly developed a zealous cult following, it appears that mainstream audiences had difficulty digesting the film’s graphic violence. Los Angeles Times film critic Kenneth Turan described Fight Club as: “a witless mishmash of whiny infantile philosophizing and bone-crunching violence” (Swallow 2003: 138). The film’s tepid reception at the box office is also largely attributed to the film’s unfortunate release date, which coincided with the highly publicized school shootings in Columbine, Colorado. After the Columbine massacre, Fight Club was released at a time when many U.S. politicians targeted on-screen violence as the cause for “real” violence in a way recalled reactions to Kubrick’s Clockwork.161 British film and cultural theorist James Swallow notes that the arguments lined up against Clockwork “were called out of retirement and re-applied” to Fight Club (2003: 139).

Similar to the manner Kubrick merged graphic violence with biting satire to articulate a social commentary, Fincher also employs his own unique brand of satirical violence to convey a social message with regard to postmodern American consumer culture. In fact, some critics considered Fight Club the nineties version of Clockwork and dubbed it the “Best Movie of 1999 That No One Saw.” Janet Maslin, film critic for the New York Times, wrote that Fincher: “...finds subject matter audacious enough to suit his lighting fast visual sophistication, and put that style to stunningly effective use” (139).

159 Geoffrey Kleinman, “Interview with Chuck Palahniuk,” in DVD Talk (text online) accessed 29 April 2004, http://www.dvdtalk.com/interviews/002227.html. In the interview, Palahniuk is asked about his experience working with Fincher and Uhls: “The first time I saw the dailies of the movie was when I went down to the film’s location and David Fincher would drag me off the set to his trailer to show me the dailies. He would be watching me for my reaction, and I had little or no idea where these scenes fit together. (...) Now that I see the movie, especially when I sat down with Jim Uhls and record a commentary track for the DVD, I was sort of embarrassed of the book, because the movie had streamlined the plot and made it so much more effective and made connections that I had never thought to make.”

160 James Swallow, Dark Eye: The Films of David Fincher (London: Reynolds and Hearn Ltd., 2003), 138. “The film’s mediocre opening weekend was blamed by many on a marketing campaign that Art Linson called ‘ill-conceived’ and ‘one-dimensional,’ that ‘only sold the titillation of young guys beating the shit out of each other without letting the audience know of the much smarter and wittier ironic purpose to the whole journey,’” “Fight Club Box Office Numbers,” in Box Office Mojo (statistics online) accessed 13 July 2005, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=fightclub.htm. More precisely, the domestic gross was $37,030,102, and the overseas gross was $63,823,651 for a worldwide gross of $100,853,753.

161 Swallow, Dark Eye (2003), 138. In response to the Columbine “connections,” Fincher stated: “To say that because we have Columbine then we have to be very careful about the ideas we put out there is inane, ludicrous. I think we have to be responsible for the ideas that we present in a prudent or a glamorized way, but I don’t think that the violence in this movie is portrayed in a glamorous way. I think the anarchic elements of it are properly dealt with and put in their moral place.”
Much like *Clockwork* and Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killer’s* (1994), *Fight Club* was not originally seen as an intelligent and socially relevant work, but rather generally misunderstood as a mindless glorification of violence. Fincher responded to this common line of attack by saying:

People misread a lot of what happened in *Fight Club* as some sort of anarchist recruiting film, and really, I don’t think the movie really promotes any specific answers, it just says, “This is a frustration and it’s part of the maturation of the male creature” (141).

In the film, Tyler offers a source of the frustration that Fincher refers to when he recognizes that he, and others like him, are white-collared slaves who work jobs they hate so they can buy “shit we don’t need.” These men are a kind of capitalist proletariat who sell their productive labor for wages that have not effectively enabled them to consume their way into the advertised ideal. It is precisely the film’s treatment of consumerism with regard to the frustrated “male creature” that this chapter seeks to expose in light of Hegelian phenomenology and the lord–bondswoman relationship in particular.

**Emanasalation Through Consumerism**

The following passage presents a verbal exchange between the protagonist “Jack” and the visible manifestation of his subconscious desires – Tyler Durden. The dialogue takes place in a strip club shortly after Jack returned from a business trip and found his condominium destroyed by a rather mysterious explosion:

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**Tyler:** You know, man, it could be worse. A woman could cut off your penis while you’re sleeping and toss it out the window of a moving car. **Jack:** There’s always that. I don’t know, it’s just when you buy furniture, you tell yourself that’s it. That’s the last sofa I’m gonna need. Whatever else happens, I’ve got that sofa problem handled. I had it all. I had a stereo that was very decent, a wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I was close to being complete. (...) **Tyler:** Why do guys like you and I know what a duvet is? Is this essential in the hunter-gatherer sense of the word? No. What are we then? **Jack:** We’re, uh, you know, consumers. **Tyler:** Right, we’re consumers. We are by-products of a lifestyle obsession. Murder, crime, poverty, these things don’t concern me. What concerns me is celebrity magazines, television with 500 channels, some guy’s name on my underwear. Rogaine, Viagra, Olestra. **Jack:** Martha Stewart. **Tyler:** Fuck Martha Stewart. Martha’s polishing the brass on the Titanic. It’s all going down, man. So fuck off with your sofa units and Strinme green stripe patterns. I say never be complete. (...) The things you own, end up owning you (Fincher 1999: 11)

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102 David Fincher, dir., *Fight Club*, (Beverly Hills: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000). 15. The dialogue, while audible, can also be seen on the screen via the subtitle feature for a more accurate transcription. The film (on the DVD) is divided up into 36 chapters and will be referenced accordingly. Subsequent citations are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

103 While he does use several false identities throughout the film, like the novel, the real name of the film’s protagonist is never explicitly revealed. However, toward the middle of the film, the protagonist discovers stacks of old magazines in which there are a series of articles where organs in the human body refer to themselves in the first person: “I am Jack’s medulla oblongata” and “I am Jack’s colon.” The protagonist adopts this practice and refers to the functions of his own body in a similar fashion. For example, when jealous of Tyler’s affection for another character he states: “I am Jack’s inflated sense of rejection.” In order to facilitate a simpler and more personal discussion of the protagonist, he will be referred to simply as “Jack.”
This passage presents the first noteworthy exchange between Jack and Tyler with regard to the potentially problematic influence of consumerism in Jack's life. Jack's dialogue exposes his reliance on material possessions to provide personal contentment, which is evidenced by the connection between his possessions (sofa, stereo, wardrobe) and his idea of being "complete." This notion signifies Jack's existence as a by-product of a consumer "lifestyle obsession," as Tyler puts it. To state it differently, these objects have become the armor that is Jack's identity because - largely through the manipulation of advertising - he has been conditioned to believe that the acquisition of material possessions would result in a sense of contentment and increased self-worth. He is tied slavishly to his possessions because they have come to represent his identity and thus Jack, in a sense, is "owned" by them.

Although the both narrative texts consider it, it is the film that devotes more energy to a specific consequence of Jack's material identity dependence, which is emasculation. As merely a consumer, Jack's role as a man - in the "hunter-gatherer" sense - has been transformed to a collector of things, which are not essential to his survival. Although hunter-gatherer societies still remain in a few remote parts of the world, they have been largely replaced by industrialized, consumer-based societies. In the film, Jack exemplifies young men in postmodern American culture who have no need to cultivate their primitive survival instincts because they have no real immediate fear of death or hunger. Having their basic needs perpetually met, individuals like Jack are enabled to redirect their attention toward consumption and overly concern themselves with such trivial items as celebrity magazines, designer underwear, and drugs for hair loss and sexual dysfunction, and late night cable television.

In other words, Jack (and others like him) has become someone who knows what a duvet is. Taken to the furthest extremes, the emasculating effects of a consumer lifestyle could result in the metaphorical removal of one's manhood (genitalia), which may be summarily thrown out of the "window of a moving car." 

Through its visual and auditory components, the film presents the emasculating effects of the consumer culture that surrounds the narrative's principal characters. For

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104 Patricia Pisters, *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working With Deleuze in Film Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 96. Pisters refers to Jack's condition as being: "completely territorialized by capitalist consumption and what in the film is called 'Ikea nesting instincts.'"


106 Tyler's metaphor references the well-publicized trial of Lorena Bobbit, a Venezuelan immigrant to the United States who removed her physically abusive husband's penis while he was sleeping and tossed it out the window of her car as she sped away. Although she became a folk hero of sorts, she was ultimately deported.
example, the first and most visibly apparent example of emasculation is seen in the "Remaining Men Together" support group for men with testicular cancer. In chapter two, we see Jack’s face resting between a pair of rather large breasts, which happen to belong to a man named Robert Paulson, or "Big Bob."  

In addition to Bob’s “bitch-tits,” a rather obvious example of emasculation, we see several other male pairs in a rather close, intimate embrace as they cry and share their sad stories with one another. While it is not abnormal for a man to cry, it is (in American culture) largely considered a more feminine characteristic to embrace another, cry, and share one’s feelings. Although the film does echo the novel’s notion of salvation through destruction, the primary thrust of the filmic text concerns the emasculating effects of consumerism. Therefore, keeping in mind the notion of salvation through destruction and the Hegelian lord-bondsmen relationship, in the following interpretation and analysis of Fincher’s filmic adaptation, I examine the visual and auditory components of the narrative text in an effort to concretize a story which articulates a fabula that instantiates the notion of emasculation through consumerism.

Multiple Personality Disorder: Jack and Tyler

Before exploring Jack’s more specific narratological functions, I first examine him in relation to his other self-consciousness – Tyler. Similar to the novel, in the film, Jack suffers from multiple personality disorder (MPD), or a psychological condition in which a person exhibits two or more disassociated personalities that function as distinct entities. To best facilitate the filmic imaging of this disorder, I begin with the explicit revelation of Tyler and then reveal how his existence was anticipated. In addition, like the novel, I consider Jack (and not Tyler) as the source of the disorder because it is Jack who represents the narrative’s anti-hero protagonist and character-bound narrator. In an effort to clarify the

167 Fincher dir., Fight Club (1999), 2. Jack explains the existence of Bob’s breasts: “Bob had bitch-tits. (...) Eight months ago, Bob’s testicles were removed. Then hormone therapy. He developed bitch-tits because his testosterone was too high, and his body upped the estrogen.”
nature of this disorder and its bearing on the dynamic between Jack and Tyler, I examine the visual component of editing and the soundtrack feature of dialogue.168

In the film, Jack flies from city to city in search of Tyler who had previously disappeared. In one of these American cities, Jack has a conversation with a bartender who, because of his badly bruised face, appears to be a member of a fight club franchise.169 Their dialogue presents the first unequivocal revelation that Jack “is” Tyler:

Bartender: Is this a test sir? Jack: No, this is not a test. You were in here last Thursday. Jack: Thursday? Bartender: You were standing exactly where you are now asking exactly how good security is. It’s tight as a drum, sir. Jack: Who do you think I am? Bartender: Are you sure this isn’t a test? Jack: No, this is not a test. Bartender: You’re Mr. Durden (30).

Like the novel, the implication gleaned from this exchange is that the bartender believes he is looking at Tyler Durden. It is obvious that the actor who plays Jack (Edward Norton) looks quite different than the actor who plays Tyler (Brad Pitt). There are two possibilities: one, the bartender is simply mistaken or two, he is, in fact, speaking to Tyler.

At this point, like the audience, Jack is uncertain which option is accurate. In order to eliminate his lingering uncertainty, Jack immediately calls Marla:


With his doubts removed by Marla’s confirmation, Jack hangs up the phone and Tyler appears in the hotel room. It is the following exchange between Jack and Tyler that explicitly reveals the true dynamic of their relationship:

Jack: Now answer me, why do people think that I’m you? Tyler: I think you know. Jack: No, I don’t. Tyler: Yes, you do. Tyler: Why would anyone possibly confuse you with me? Jack: Uh... I... I don’t know. Tyler: You got it. Jack: No. Tyler: Say it. Jack: Because... Tyler: Say it. Jack: Because we’re the same person. Tyler: That’s right. Jack: Tyler, I don’t understand this. Jack: You were looking for a way to change your life. You could not do this on your own. All the ways you wish you could be, that’s me. I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not (31).

168 Robert Kolker, Film, Form, and Culture, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: McGraw-Hill Companies, 2002), 236: “‘Editing’: The process of cutting film footage and assembling the pieces together into an expressive, narrative structure.”
169 American Heritage College Dictionary (2002), 550: “‘Franchise’: the right or license granted to an individual or group to market a company’s goods or services in a particular territory.” During his business trips, Jack (as Tyler) planted fight clubs all over the United States; in a sense, he has set up fight club franchises. This is a practice typical of the corporate world he has come to loathe.
This exchange clearly lays out the nature of Tyler’s existence and the impetus behind his conception in Jack’s subconscious mind. To free himself from the consumer life he felt imprisoned by, Jack created Tyler, or the embodiment of Jack’s repressed aggression, which is the result of an unfulfilled, consumer lifestyle. In other words, Jack’s repression was so acute that it became a mental disorder that visibly manifested itself into his alter ego – Tyler Durden.

From the vantage point of this confrontation, a number of hints that precede it became understandable. The first three-quarters of the film contain several covertly clever anticipations that Tyler does not truly exist outside of Jack’s mind. Of course, these understated anticipations become much more apparent in retrospect, and clearly obvious after multiple viewings. The second chapter presents two types of anticipation that Jack is Tyler. This chapter (chapter one being the opening credits) presents the beginning of the narrative, but the last event in the fabula. Thus, at this point, Jack is aware (although the audience is not) that he and Tyler are the same person. The film then presents several anticipations that Tyler is merely a figment of Jack’s imagination.

The first type of anticipation comes in the form of a thought montage that gives the viewer visual entrance into Jack’s head. Although the viewer would likely assume that the montages merely display Jack’s thoughts, the images project what he could only know as Tyler. Since, ultimately, they are the same person and share the same brain, Jack has access to certain details that only Tyler could be privy to. In chapter two, the first of five thought montages takes the viewer through underground parking garages and reveals a large amount of explosives rigged to support columns of the skyscrapers built on top of them. After this first montage on Jack (in voiceover narration) states: “I know this, because Tyler knows this.” In retrospect, once we become aware that Jack and Tyler are the same person, his words take on new meaning. Seeing the film for the first time, the viewer, ignorant of Jack’s disorder, would most likely presume that Jack had acquired the information from Tyler through the normal channels such as a conversation, written correspondence, or otherwise. However, Jack “knows this” because, as Tyler, he formulated the plans for Project Mayhem, which includes the destruction of the skyscrapers.

The fifth montage, in chapter thirty-one, occurs when Tyler appears in Jack’s hotel room after he had called Maria for confirmation. This montage is no longer anticipatory, but rather more expositional in purpose as Jack consciously remembers, for the first time, all the things he did as Tyler. Montage five shows scenes shown earlier in the film, however, Jack is now placed where Tyler previously stood, or Jack is in the scene and Tyler is missing altogether. In other words, the audience now sees Jack acting as Tyler or instead of Jack engaging in a fight with Tyler, Jack fights himself in the parking lot of Lou’s Tavern. We are granted explicit visual access into the effects of Jack’s multiple personality disorder that have spanned the embedded fabula. What is more, this particular montage was edited with a flutter-cutting technique. Flutter-cutting is a type of editing that makes use of a rapid progression of small jump cuts and the effect is a quick, jerky movement of the screen images (Kolker 2002: 238). Therefore, in the case of this particular montage, the use of flutter-cutting gives it an agitated, eccentric quality.

170 Fincher dir., Fight Club (1999). Although there are five thought montages in total, the first and the fifth stand out with regard to the anticipation that Tyler is Jack. The second montage, in chapter ten, reveals precisely how Jack’s condominium was destroyed. The third, in chapter twelve, reveals Tyler’s night jobs as a projectionist who splices single frames of pornography into family films and a waiter at an upscale hotel who urinates in soup. The fourth, in chapter seventeen, reveals Jack and Maria having sex, although his face is blurred because neither he (cf Jack) nor the audience should be aware that Jack is Tyler at that point in the narrative.
which reveals it to be a visual metaphor for Jack's distorted recollection of his existence as Tyler.

In addition to the anticipatory quality of the thought montage, chapter three exposes the first instance of four subliminal Tylers revealed before he fully manifests in chapter nine. By subliminal Tyler, I mean that an image of Tyler has been inserted into a single frame of film to create these subliminal images, which appear for only 1/24 of a second. An example of this technique can be seen below when Jack pays a visit to the hospital with the expectation that the doctor will prescribe him sleeping medication to ease his insomnia.

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While these images are not thematically connected to the diegetic events, they further elucidate Jack's multiple personality disorder and anticipate the eventual and complete manifestation of Tyler as a character in the story. Internal to the narrative itself, they function as a self-reflexive homage to the subliminal pornography Tyler splices into family films during his work as a projectionist.

In addition to these stylistic anticipatory devices, there are other, more traditional visual and auditory anticipations. For example, after their initial conversation in chapter nine, Jack mentions: "We have the exact same briefcase." Following this announcement, the camera tilts down to reveal that his observation is, indeed, accurate. Lastly, in chapter eleven, a medium, half-torso shot of Jack and Tyler, who stand facing one another, reveals them to be roughly the same size, hair color, and build.

171 David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction and Film Viewers Guide.* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 2003) 39: "A frame is a single image on the strip of film. When a series of frames are projected onto a screen in quick succession (currently 24 frames per second), an illusion of movement is created." On DVD, the individual frames can be advanced one at a time, which allows for a clear image of the frames in which the "subliminal Tyler" appears in chapters three, four, five, and seven.
Principally through the skillful manipulation of editing and dialogue, the dynamic of Jack and Tyler’s distinctive union is made overtly manifest. Hence, it becomes possible to realize that — although they are constructed as separate characters in the narrative — Jack and Tyler are the same person.

Characterizing Jack and Tyler

Due, in large part, to the visual composition of film, it is primarily through the visual component that Jack and Tyler are implicitly characterized as distinct characters in the story. With this in mind, I examine how these two characters are implicitly characterized through such features of mise-en-scene as costume, makeup, and lighting.

Arguably, *Fight Club* relies most heavily on the traditional features of costume and makeup to tell us about the principal characters as they develop throughout the course of the film. For example, we first see “consumer” Jack in a rather conservative business suit as he sits in his office where he is employed as recall coordinator for a major car manufacturer. In chapter three, Jack, dressed neatly in a shirt and tie, sits inertly at his desk with a pale, washed-out appearance.

The result of this particular visual presentation initially characterizes Jack as a weary, rather lifeless individual drained by the monotony of his daily routine. This initial instance of Jack’s implicit characterization, imaged through costume and make-up, is reinforced through the filmic subject’s manipulation of lighting. The most noteworthy dimension of lighting is its key, the intensity of lighting within the screen frame that fills the spaces where each scene is shot. Specifically, there are two types of key lighting: high and
low. In *Fight Club*, high-key lighting saturates the interior spaces of Jack's office, his condominium, and the airports he flies to on business. Each of these locations (particularly his office) signify the consumer lifestyle that has wearied Jack. In other words, the high-key lighting creates a visual link between a location like Jack's office and his inadequate, sterile consumer existence. In addition, the high-key lighting possesses a light-blue tint, which adds a pallid, sterile appearance. Thus, bathed in high-key lighting, the consumer Jack is implicitly characterized as a kind of orderly, but sickly and emotionally barren individual.

In contrast to the high key spaces associated with consumer Jack, low-key lighting saturates the space in the interior shots of the fight club and Tyler's house on Paper Street.

Just as his office and condominium represent his recently relinquished corporate, consumer lifestyle, the basement fight clubs and his house on Paper Street signify his new anti-consumer existence as Tyler Durden. Particularly in the basement shots of the fight club, intense overhead spot lighting is used to highlight specific actors in the scene.

172 Kolker, *Film, Form, and Culture* (2002), 187: "'Key light': the main overhead light that lights the set. High-key is bright, intense light. American comedies tend to be shot in high key. Low-key is diffuse and shadowy light. Film noir tends to be shot in low-key."

173 This look could be accomplished either through colored lenses on the camera during principle photography, or through a post-production coloring process known as "digital grading." Wikipedia, (encyclopedia online) accessed 14 July 2005: http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Digital+grading. Wikipedia, (encyclopedia online) accessed 14 July 2005: "'Digital grading': a process through which celluloid film is transferred into a computer, manipulated by changing cooler or smoothing effects shots, and transferred back onto celluloid."
The contrast of low-key with the focused overhead spotlighting adds a dramatic effect and, consequently, the intense look of these spaces emphasizes the meaning of the violent, character-transforming events that occur within them. The alteration of consumer Jack's appearance reflects his transformation from the sterile, commodified world of corporate consumerism to the darker, anarchical world of his life outside of mainstream society. As he progressively becomes Tyler, his deteriorating appearance gradually begins to stand out in contrast to the orderliness of his surroundings.

Tyler exists as a hyper-stylish projection of what Jack desires to look like if he could ever completely free himself of the conservative image he must preserve to effectively operate in the corporate world. Tyler's costumes are eccentric and modish in contrast to Jack's plain, conventional look.

Jack's eventual release from his consumer lifestyle – neatly correlated in his appearance – is a measured process that is seen the next time he is at work (chapter fourteen) when his clothes are considerably less neat and his face is scratched. Later in the same chapter, Jack's face appears even more beat-up as he dabs blood from his eye. Finally, completing the transformation in chapter nineteen, Jack no longer wears a tie, his shirt is undone, his hair is unkempt, a smoke hangs from his lip, and his face is noticeably beaten.

A visual metaphor for his internal transformation, Jack's tousled appearance, which works in his new, anti-consumer world of the fight club, now stands in stark contrast to the corporate world in which he can no longer function as he plunges deeper into his neurosis.
Jack: Triple Narrative Agency

As was evidenced, although Jack and Tyler are the same (corporeal) person in the fabula, they are developed as separate characters in the story. In *Fight Club*, the protagonist's capacities as narrator, focalizer, and actor are revealed through the interplay of speech and editing. Filmic dialogue is the audible manifestation of speech, whether diegetic or non-diegetic. *Fight Club* begins in medias res, in the primary fabula as Tyler holds a gun in Jack's mouth on what appears to be the top floor of a downtown skyscraper:

Tyler: This is it, ground zero. Would you like to say a few words to mark the occasion? Jack (muffled): I can't think of anything. Jack (voiceover): With a gun barrel between your teeth, you speak only in vowels (2).

This passage marks two levels of Jack's speech. Cn Jack's first level (nondiegetic) speech, noted cn1, is heard: "With a gun barrel between your teeth, you speak only in vowels." Cf Jack's second level (diegetic) speech, noted cn2, occurs when he (as internal focalizer) directly addresses Tyler and states: "I can't think of anything." The first level speech in the primary and embedded fabulas represents the non-diegetic speech of an off-screen narrator made audible through voiceover narration. 174

Although the viewer is led to believe that cn Jack externally focalizes the events of the fabula, he functions only as a hypothetical narrator, a device manipulated by the filmic subject to unravel the narrative. At all times, the filmic subject is responsible for the organization and composition of the narrative that flows through the hypothetical narrator, which is in this case Jack. What is more, the unseen cn Jack is not conscious of the filmic subject's authority over his capacity to relay events. In the film, cn Jack (whose age is undisclosed) is never visible and is only an aspect of the narrative through the soundtrack feature of voiceover narration. On the other hand, cf Jack is a construct of the visible features of mise-en-scene and since cf Jack is visible, it is easier to express the specifics of his characterization. Judging from such perceptible cues as appearance, behavior, and occupation, it appears that cf Jack (for roughly the first third of the film) is a relatively conservative, upper middle class white-collar worker in his early thirties. However, there are actually multiple cf Jacks because *Fight Club* contains both primary and embedded fabulas. In other words, through a retroversion to the near past, cf Jack in the embedded fabula is slightly younger than cf Jack in the primary one.

In the following passage - at the support group Remaining Men Together - Jack and another man embrace and exchange sad stories as they attempt to comfort each other. However, Jack does not attend because he has testicular cancer, but rather because he seeks the unmodified experience of genuine emotions:

Jack (voiceover): The big moosey slobbering all over me, that was Bob. Bob: We're still men. Jack: Yes, we're men. Men is what we are. Jack (voiceover): Eight months ago Bob's testicles were removed. Then hormone therapy. He developed bitch-tits because his testosterone was too high and his body upped the estrogen. And that was where I fit in (2).

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174 Jahn, *Poems, Plays, and Prose* (2001) F4.2.1: "Filmic narrators come in two kinds depending on whether they are visible on-screen or not. Both are speaking roles, but only the on-screen narrator has an acting, as well as a speaking role. Voiceover narration is the result of an off-screen narrator's first level, non-diegetic speech."
Exemplifying two levels of speech, the above passage operates similarly to the one that preceded it. Once more, we see the first level, non-diegetic speech of cn Jack who states: “The big moosey slobbering all over me, that was Bob.” The antecedent to “me,” or cf Jack in the embedded fabula, responds to Bob in second level, diegetic speech when he says: “Yes, we’re men.” If this were seen in written text, cf Jack’s words would be offset by quotation marks. Conversely, cn Jack’s speech, in this case his voiceover narration, would be absent of quotation marks.

The difference in levels of dialogue is further exemplified in chapter four when Jack visits a doctor for his insomnia. In this case, I juxtapose passages from the novel and the film respectively in order to elucidate how filmic dialogue conveys Jack’s capacities as narrator and focalizer:


In chapter two of the novel, the second level speech of the doctor (like cf Jack) is set-off with quotes and differentiated from the first level speech of cn Joe, which is not. The following passage marks the filmic version of the literary one seen above:


Doctor: No. You need healthy natural sleep. Chew some Valerian root and get more exercise (4).

In the film, the fact that there is an audible difference in the sound of cn Jack’s voice and that cf Jack’s mouth does not move are the attributive signs, or what distinguish first from second level filmic speech in place of quotation marks. Like the novel, speech in the film helps the audience determine Jack’s function as narrator and focalizer. However, unlike the novel, dialogue is delivered with the added visual and auditory components of lip movement (or lack thereof) and sound.

**Sequential Ordering**

Like the novel, the film presents us with an embedded fabula that explains the primary one, which is merely an occasion for a perceptible, character-bound narrator (cn Jack) to narrate a story. However, in the film, the embedding of the fabulas travels one level deeper. In other words, there is another fabula embedded within the embedded fabula.

The larger, first level embedded fabula I note as ef1, and the smaller, second level embedded fabula I note as ef2. Specifically, ef1, which takes up the largest portion of the film, is an anachrony in the form of an extended retroversion, which has anachronies of its own (ef2). After the first retroversion (in chapter two) takes us to the start of ef1, there is another retroversion, which takes us to the second level embedded fabula shortly thereafter. The ef2 moves forward for several scenes until it catches up again with ef1 in the gymnasium where Remaining Men Together meets. This particular brand of sequential ordering is revealed in *Fight Club* largely through the manipulation of
speech and parallel temporal editing. Just as editing can be used to move the narrative forward, it can also be used to move it backward. The following passage takes place just as the primary fabula yields to ef1:

Jack: And suddenly, I realize that all of this: the gun, the bombs, the revolution has got something to do with a girl named Maria Singer (2).

In the following shot we see cf Jack’s head being thrust between Bob’s breasts. The first retroversion has transported us back to the ef1 where the younger cf Jack exists. From there, the chronological time of the fabula progresses until, shortly thereafter, another retroversion occurs. This retroversion, like the first, is signaled by Jack’s monologue when he states: “No, wait. Back up. Let me start earlier” (2). From there, the ef2 moves forward until it reunites with ef1 where we again see Jack’s head between Bob’s breasts. At this point, ef1 moves forward until it catches back up with the primary fabula where Tyler holds a gun in Jack’s mouth on the top floor of a skyscraper.

This reconnection is explicitly signaled by cn Jack who states: “I think this is about where we came in” (35). Jack’s declaration refers us back to the beginning of the film, where the audience originally was injected (medias res) into the middle of the primary fabula. In chapter two, when Tyler asked him if he had anything to say, Jack replied: “I can’t think of anything.” In chapter thirty-five, when Tyler repeats the identical question he replies: “I still can’t think of anything,” to which Tyler replies, “Ah, flashback humor.” This dialogical exchange presents the viewer with a rare, self-reflexive glimpse into the sequential ordering of the story.

Through speech and parallel temporal editing, the film presents an analogous, but slightly more complex example of the narrative’s sequential ordering than its literary forerunner. Specifically, the filmic narrative comprises two embedded fabulas (in the form of extended retroversions), which explain the primary fabula. Thus, the increased intricacy of the film’s narratorial structure is found in its multiple degrees of fabula embedding, which the novel lacks.

Kolker, Film, Form, and Culture (2002), 39: “‘Parallel editing’: inter-cutting or cross-cutting two different sequences. Parallel editing is of two kinds: parallels in space and parallels in time. Parallel spatial editing includes crosscuts between two temporally simultaneous events happening in different spaces. Parallel temporal editing cuts two separate events which occurred at different times.”
Films and Imagined Temporal Derivatives

Similar to the function of literary space in the novel, the depiction of Fight Club's filmic space serves as a characterizing aspect of the story. Externally focalized by the filmic subject, the filmic space is described through such features as camera position, set and costume design, and speech.

The position of the camera in relation to the space it photographs is a feature of the component of mise-en-scene and a consequence of the contributions of the director and cameraman. In regard to the conveyance of Fight Club's filmic space, there are a variety of shots employed and, most notably, a number of semi-long shots that allow the viewer to gain a broad perspective of filmic space. Moreover, such a perspective creates a sense of openness and autonomy for the actors. For example, chapter five begins with an establishing, semi-long shot inside the gymnasium where Remaining Men Together meets. In this case, the camera is positioned at a semi-long distance from the actors, which effectively permits the viewer to gain greater visual access to the gym's space. This type of camera placement - repeated several times throughout the film - fleshes out Fight Club's filmic space because it grants a wide visual entrance. This technique is also seen in chapter eleven, which begins with an establishing, crane shot of Lou's tavern. With the camera positioned at a distance across the street and elevated on a crane, the viewer is permitted to see not only the entire building, but also the modern industrial, urban space within which it is embedded.

Conversely, when the camera is placed close to the actors and the set, our access to filmic space is limited. In one of the few outdoor scenes, in chapter thirty-two, Jack tries to persuade Marla to leave the city because her life may be in danger. In this case, there is no establishing shot and the camera is placed rather close to the actors. Thus, the viewer's access to the visual details that create a sense of filmic space is restricted. We can see that they are in a modern city, but the proximity of the camera makes it difficult for the viewer to determine precisely what city.

In this case, the consequence of such a narrow perspective restricts the viewer from attaching the event to a particular city, which can grant the narrative a more universal application. To put it another way, if the preponderance of the events took place in St...

170 Jahn, Poems, Plays, and Prose (2001), F2.2: "A 'long shot' places the camera at a distance from the objects of the shot. This shot is often used to establish setting ('establishing shot'). The term 'semi-long' shot is sometimes used to indicate a slightly closer view."
Louis, for example, the viewer would be likely to attach those events to that particular city, rather than allow for the possibility that they could occur in “any” U.S. city.

In addition to fleshing-out or restricting space, camera placement can also generate an emotional atmosphere. For example, in Jack’s office the camera is always placed quite close to the set and actors, which creates the feeling of stifling, of claustrophobia.

In Fight Club, the vast majority of scenes are shot in soundstages, which are enormous warehouses that provide the filmic subject more control over such factors as weather and temperature. Jack’s office, his house on Paper Street, and the fight club are arguably the three most prominent soundstage sets in the film. Revealed through establishing shots, both the house and the fight club (in the basement of Lou’s Tavern) are in an urban, industrial part of some nonspecific city. To give the house an abandoned look, it is sparsely decorated with old furniture and appliances and dressed with peeling paint, broken stairs, and rusty pipes. Although not quite as dramatic, the fight club is similarly decorated and dressed to give it the appearance of age and dereliction. Like the novel, space is used as a metaphor for the protagonist’s transition from his sterile, safe life to his more dilapidated, dangerous existence as Tyler.

While the look of the sets and actors provide visual clues into space, character, and time, the feature of first level dialogue can, at times, grant a kind of audible entrance into filmic space. As recall coordinator for a major car manufacturer, Jack flies
to crash sites to determine if a recall is financially viable for the corporation that employs him to make such decisions. To reach these sites, Jack must fly through various airports: “You wake up at Sea-Tac... S.F.O... L.A.X. You wake up at O'Hare... Dallas Ft. Worth... B.W.I.” (8). Here, the airport he names serves such American cities as Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, and Baltimore. When we see an interior shot of an airport, we assume that it is embedded within the larger space of one of the U.S. cities he names.

In Fight Club, the most profitable entrance into filmic space is conveyed via the manipulation of camera placement. Depending on the position of the camera in relation to the actors and locations, we are given varying degrees of access to space, which is distinguished by the costumes of the characters and the design and dressing of the sets. It is from these visual cues that the viewer makes determinations about the characters, the nature of filmic space and, by implication, filmic time. Just as in the novel, the delineation of the second degree of space is used both as a form of implicit narratorial characterization and also to imply a sense of filmic time. Jack’s office is a cubicle with an outside window and is rather generically decorated. He has a personal computer, folders, and the occasional Starbucks’ coffee cup, all of which indicate a relatively recent sense of filmic time. From these visual cues, like its literary forebear, it appears that the film is set in the urban, modern (latter twentieth, or early twenty-first century) United States.

The Presentation and Treatment of Violence

Up to this point, this chapter has been primarily dedicated to the exploration and delineation of Fight Club’s narratological arrangement. This section, however, is devoted to the narrative’s presentation and thematic treatment of violence. One of Fight Club’s principal subjects, violence is largely circumscribed through speech, sound effects, camera position, and actor expression. Similar to the novel, there are three types of violence: violence directed at oneself, violence directed at others, and violence directed at the structure of society. After Marla – another “faker” who reflected his own brand of self-deception – invaded Jack’s support group, he could no longer exploit the group for his temporary fix of uncommodified experience. As a result, Jack turned to actual, physical pain.

In chapter thirteen, the viewer is confronted with the first instance of violence between individuals when Jack, at Tyler’s request, strikes his alter ego:

Tyler: I’ve never been in a fight. Have you? Jack: No, but that’s a good thing. Tyler: No, it is not. How much can you know about yourself if you’ve never been in a fight? I don’t wanna die without any scars. So, come on, hit me before I lose my nerve. Jack: God, this is crazy. Tyler: So go crazy. Let ‘er rip. Jack: Hey, I don’t know about this. Tyler: I don’t either, but who gives a shit? No one’s watching. What do you care? Jack: Wait, this is crazy. You want me to hit you? Tyler: That’s right. Jack: What, like in the face? Tyler: Surprise me.

After Jack “surprises” Tyler with a punch to the ear, Tyler hits Jack (Jack hits himself) for the first time in the chest. Subsequent to Tyler’s unanticipated action, the sound of a heartbeat can be heard while Tyler attempts to help Jack up. In response to Tyler’s action, he says: “Nah, it’s all right. That really hurts. Hit me again” (13). In this instance, because camera placement can affect how the viewer interprets the events, the use of a semi-long shot tends to distance the viewer from the actor’s violent actions. The idea that Jack wants Tyler to hit him again (in addition to the nondiegetic sound of a heartbeat) begins to fuse violence with the sensation of life. In the film, men like Jack are
only exposed to violence vicariously through television and film. This postmodern disconnect converts violence into an abstract, commodified experience. This problematizes Jack's inherent requirement for violent conflict with others in order to achieve a higher level of self-consciousness that is established through the Hegelian notion of negative relation. Lacking this opposition, Jack subconsciously invents a conscious other he can fight against, which enables him to experience real, "uncommodified" violence for the first time.

Evidenced in chapter twenty-four, this principle of a renewed sensation of life through violence is applied to other characters in the narrative such as Raymond K. Hessel (a convenience store clerk). Although it is the protagonist Joe in the novel, in the film Tyler holds a gun to Raymond's head and looks through his wallet while Jack observes:

Tyler: An expired community college student I.D. What'd you study Raymond?
Raymond: S-s-s-stuff. Tyler: Were the midterms hard? I asked you what you studied. Raymond: Biology, mostly. Tyler: Why? What did you want to be Raymond K. Hessel? The question, Raymond, was what did you want to be?
Jack: Answer him, Raymond! Jesus! Raymond: Veterinarian! Veterinarian! Tyler: That means you have to get more schooling. Raymond: Too much school. Tyler: Would you rather be dead? Would you rather die, here, on your knees in the back of a convenience store? I'm keeping your license, gonna check in on you. I know where you live. If you're not on your way to becoming a veterinarian in six weeks, you will be dead.

In the film, the fact that Jack merely observes the events tends to distance him from his actions as Tyler. In contrast to the novel, Joe is held more accountable for similar actions he commits as himself and not as Tyler. Although the violence presented here is less intensely physical, it functions in the same way as Jack's first fight with Tyler. Here, under the threat of death with a gun held to his head, Tyler intends for Raymond to shed the life he had settled for as a convenience store clerk and pursue his new life as a veterinarian. Tyler believes that this violent experience will jar Raymond from his metaphorical slumber. While camera placement somewhat distanced the viewer from Jack's violence against himself in the parking lot of Lou's Tavern, the camera is positioned much closer to the actors in the Raymond K. Hessel sequence. This type placement conveys a sense of intimacy because (through Tyler's dialogue) the viewer is granted rare entrée into the altruistic, albeit twisted inner motivations that lie behind Tyler's violent behavior.

In addition to camera placement – as previously alluded to in regard to the heartbeat sounds heard in Jack's first fight with Tyler - sound effects also governs the viewer's interpretation of violence. In the Lou's Tavern sequence, sound effects of the actual fight (punches, grunts) do not play a prominent role. However, as the fight club grows and moves into the basement of the tavern, the fight sounds grow louder and the position of the camera moves closer to the action that has grown more intensely violent. In chapter fifteen, we see the first shot of two men fighting in the basement and, for the first time, a fight is filmed using close shots with sound effects of punches and grunts. Here, as revealed through close-ups, the animated participation of the men as they observe the fight implicitly exposes the intensity of the fight itself. Conversely, (rather explicitly) in the following passage, Jack describes the sounds of the fights, which reinforces the notion of violence as a liberator from the deadening effects of consumer society:

Jack (voiceover): This kid from work, Ricky, couldn't remember whether you ordered pens with blue ink or black. But Ricky was a god for 10 minutes when he
trounced the maître d' of a local food court. Sometimes, all you could hear were
the flat, hard packing sounds over the yelling, or the wet choke when someone
cought their breath and sprayed. You weren't alive anywhere like you were
there (15).

As the film progresses, the intensity of the fights builds until it reaches a climax in
chapter twenty-six where Jack fights a character known as “Angel.” In the novel, this
event is externally focalized by cn Jack. However, in the film, the focalization of this
same event shifts back and forth from the external focalization of cn Jack to the internal
focalization of both cn Jack and Angel. Through Angel’s focalization, the scene begins
with a slow motion, close shot of Jack who exhibits a rather malevolent, deranged
expression. The diegetic sounds of the men’s shouts in the background are also heard in
slow motion, which gives the sequence a rather uncanny, train wreck quality. Then, as
Jack proceeds to viciously beat Angel, the background noise of the men’s voices is
muted and only the gruesome sounds of flesh being pounded and a sinister, high-
pitched, non-diegetic sound effect that floats above them remain. In the novel, this
event is described in explicit detail by cn Joe:

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 (Palahniuk 1999:123).

Despite the intensity of Joe’s description, the filmic version carries more pathos because
the beating is seen partly through Angel’s internal focalization as he peers up at Jack
(Angel’s blood spattered on his face) who beats him nearly to the point of death. The
sheer brutality of this event is implicitly revealed by the close shots of the men’s reactions
as they observe Jack’s savage catharsis of a frustrated life:

Jack (voiceover): I felt like putting a bullet between the eyes of every panda
that wouldn’t screw to save its species. I wanted to open the dump valves on oil
tankers and smothe r all those French beaches I’d never see. I wanted to breath
smoke. Tyler: Where’d you go, psycho boy? Jack: I felt like destroying something
beautiful (26).

The personal nature of Angel’s focalization, the diegetic sounds of flesh being
pounded, the slow motion photography, and the eerie non-diegetic sound effects are
what distinguish this particular fight from the others seen in the film. It appears that fight
club is no longer about simply feeling alive, but an occasion for Jack to vent his
disenchanted rage over an unfulfilled existence.177 It begins to appear that – while the
fight club had effectively granted these men an escape from the monotony of their
ordinary lives – violence may not be a long-term solution to their problems. This
recognition is reinforced by the close shots of the men’s faces as they seem to
simultaneously comprehend the ultimate ineffectualness of their aggression. They are
beginning to see their acts through a kind of Hegelian lens in that it may not be the
violent mastery over the other, but rather a willful submission to it that allows the
bondsman to supersede the consciousness of the lord.

177 Pisters, The Matrix of Visual Culture (2003), 97: “Of course, the violence of the fights is a literal
attack on the beauty and glamour of consumption culture. Tyler and Jack look with contempt at
Calvin Klein underwear ads and cherish their self-mutilations as a resistant act against capitalism
and its (surplus) values.”
Project Mayhem, the third type of violence, demonstrates hostility directed at the structure of consumer society. Conceived by Tyler, it was originally a form of relatively harmless urban vandalism meant to call attention to the societal attachment to consumerism. By means of the montage, Project Mayhem’s urban terrorism is revealed in chapter twenty-three through such (often humorous) acts as: the destruction of satellite dishes, the deployment of luxury car airbags with baseball bats, the mocking alteration of billboards, and the demagnetization of rental videos with bulk degousers. However, acts that merely intend to call attention to the problem of consumerism prove insufficient for Tyler. Consequently, the scope of Project Mayhem is widened to encompass the elimination of the corporate infrastructure that supports consumerism, which he aims to accomplish through the destruction of the headquarters of major credit card corporations. At the conclusion of the film, Jack and Marla observe the destructive climax that seeks to accomplish Project Mayhem’s long-term objective, which is to erase the debt record so that everyone may “go back to zero” and society can begin anew.

Although the violence of Project Mayhem is not directed at individuals, Big Bob (a fight club member) dies in chapter twenty-nine during a bold attempt to simultaneously destroy a piece of corporate art and a franchise coffee shop. Responding to Bob’s death, Tyler states: “If you wanna make an omelet, you gotta crack some eggs” (29). Attempting to avoid bloodshed, Project Mayhem’s destruction often occurred at night after the buildings had been emptied of their occupants. However, Tyler’s reaction to Bob’s death implies that he is willing to sacrifice human life for the greater cause of the revolution. What prevents Tyler (lord) from achieving the understanding self-consciousness that Jack (bondsman) finally obtains, is his willingness to sacrifice others for his cause, rather than himself.

While all three types of violence offer these men a temporary respite from the emasculating, numbing effects of life in a consumer culture, the escalating nature of violence is portrayed as a destructive and countervailing force in regard to their evolution of consciousness. However, Jack (as Tyler) employs the destructive violence of

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178 Pisters, The Matrix of Visual Culture (2003), 97. Pisters describes the process behind this aim: “To do this, they take the ultimate residual elements of glamour culture as the basic material for their products: they go to a liposuction clinic and steal liposuction fat. From the body fat, they skim the glycerin from which they make both glycerin soap and nitroglycerin bombs. The soaps they sell to department stores (‘It was beautiful, we sold rich ladies their own fat asses.’) The explosives are used to explode credit card company buildings and other symbols of capitalism. In a powerful and concrete way, we see here an immanent system of capitalism at work: the residual (fat) is turned into a consumption good (soap, which in itself produces beauty and glamour) and into the ultimate destructive weapon against the whole system, nitroglycerin bombs.”
Project Mayhem to rid himself of the consumer society that has prevented him from obtaining self-realization, or a kind of Hegelian understanding self-consciousness. One can assume that – like the violence presented in the fight clubs – the broader devastation of Project Mayhem would not ultimately produce a utopia and end the oppression of the individual by the collective. Although the fight clubs do provisionally allow the individual to experience real, uncommodified life, the look horrified looks on the men's faces during Angel's beating implicitly unveil the true character of violence, which is further revealed in the film's conclusion.

In both texts, it is paradoxically the violent act of shooting himself in the face that frees the protagonist from his lord-like other. This act coincides with Hegel's argument that it is not the mastery of the other, but identifying it and yielding to it that fosters the evolution of self-consciousness. In other words, it is consciously subjecting oneself to the other that results in an understanding consciousness, which Joe and Jack finally obtain at the end of the primary fabula on top of the Parker-Morris building when they let go of everything (including their life) and "hit bottom." Both protagonists' freedom from their real master, the consumer society, is achieved by shooting themselves, rather than Tyler. In this way, they consciously subject themselves to Tyler and obtain their freedom from the consumer culture by letting go of everything.

**Conclusion**

Although the film does certainly reiterate the novel's notion of salvation through destruction, the primary thrust of the filmic text concerns the emasculating effects of consumerism. I examined the narrative text in order to concretize a story which articulates a fabula that instantiates emasculation through consumerism in light of the notion of salvation through destruction and the Hegelian lord-bondsman relationship.

Similar to his literary counterpart, Jack, the film's anti-hero protagonist and character-bound narrator, relays a story set in a modern Western, capitalistic society underpinned by a centrality of consumerism. The United States, *Fight Club*'s largest degree of space, affords the "haves" the ability to enjoy all the material possessions they would need to live a life of relative ease and comfort. While American consumer society grants viable access to many material luxuries, such entrée may also carry with it potentially destructive byproducts, which are initially revealed in the novel through the mechanic:

>You have a class of young strong men and women and they want to give their lives to something. 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 really don't need. We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression (Palahniuk 1999:149).

These same byproducts are also mentioned in chapter twenty of the film, although it is now Tyler who speaks:

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

From these passages, we learn that the literary Joe and the filmic Jack (and others like them) are not faced with any traditional oppositions such as war or an economic depression. Rather, they suffer from a kind spiritual depression, which results from a lack of the self-realization that can only come from the oppositions presented by real life experience. These individuals, both in the novel and the film, represent the first post-Vietnam War generation and have never really known war or economic depression, but only the empty promises of the consumer culture that has produced them. As a result, many men of Jack’s generation (who know what a “duvet” is) have been emasculated through a kind of metaphorical, consumer castration. While both texts strongly emphasize the anaesthetizing effect of consumerism, the film, more so than the novel, highlights the additional consequence of emasculation. This effect appears to affect men in their late twenties to mid-forties who represent the “middle children of history,” as Tyler refers to them (20).

The notion of emasculation is overtly embodied in Big Bob in both the novel and the film. However, it is through the visual and auditory components of film that the subject of emasculation is truly accentuated. For example, in the film, not only can we see the immensely overstated size of Bob’s breasts, but we can also hear his high-pitched voice - a point absent from the novel. Also missing from the novel, the film presents several close shots of Remaining Men Together members in a tight embrace as they sob and share their pitiful stories. In addition, we see men in the fight club either standing in rather feminine poses or tightly hugging after a fight. Although one might interpret such instances as gratuitously homoerotic, the philosophical context of the film demonstrates that these men have been emasculated by a consumer society that has detached them from the real, oppositional experience typically provided by their more traditional hunter-gatherer roles. Numbed by his consumer existence, Jack is disconnected from the role of hunter-gatherer and relegated to a collector of aesthetic identity markers (clothes, furniture, magazines), rather than items that are essential to his survival. Void of real experience, Jack becomes a collector of commodified, neatly packaged emotional experiences found at the support groups like Remaining Men Together, which he employs as a surrogate for the real life experience he has been deprived of by society.

After his support group experience is ruined by the presence of another “faker” (Marla), Jack subconsciously invents Tyler because, as Tyler says: “you (Jack) could not do this on your own” (34). Tyler embodies both the aesthetic ideals of consumerism and the stereotypical (primitive) male. In other words, Tyler is the manifestation of both the hunter-gatherer male and the unattainable “male model” imposed by advertising. Thus, Jack’s fights with Tyler signify the bondsman’s attempt to free himself from the culturally imposed lord-like ideal. The film, more so than the novel, is able to drive this point home because movie star Brad Pitt – an icon of American popular culture – plays Tyler. Pitt, generally considered a “manly” man, in many ways represents a kind of aesthetic ideal for the Western male. Tyler, while quite fashionable, also exemplifies a kind of “hyper-male,” or an “ultra-stereotypical” embodiment of the characteristics often attributed to manly men. He is muscular, handsome, aggressive, sexually promiscuous, and violent. In a modern consumer society such as the United States, these have become superfluous, commodified qualities that have little to do with physical or economic survival. For example, men exercise in gyms in an effort to acquire a muscular physique that tends to function aesthetically, rather than for survival.
It is his intrinsic need for a real oppositional experience – the counterfeit life experience of the support groups having proved ineffectual – which causes Jack to subconsciously invent Tyler. Jack requires Tyler, his lacerated consciousness, to induce the sensation of real experience that can only be found through physical pain. In likewise fashion, the men of fight club help each other achieve the same uncommodified experience that Tyler created for Jack. The fight club has become microcosmic metaphor for a real, more macrocosmic war these middle children of history have never experienced. Viewed in this way, the fight club demonstrates that these men may inherently require a type of real, possibly life-threatening hardship to attain self-realization.

It appears, from the events in the fabula, that when no real war or real economic depression is present, these men will seek out a surrogate for such experiences. In other words, if there is no war, then they will create one. When the substitute experiences of the supports groups proved inadequate, only actual, physical pain could serve as a replacement. However, it was also shown that violence – while a form of temporary relief – proves insufficient as a long-term solution. Along these lines, Project Mayhem, which took place outside of the fight club, was intended to destroy the society that had metaphorically castrated these men through the anaesthetizing effects of consumerism. Dead within confines of a consumer culture, Tyler believed these bondsmen could only find freedom is its utter annihilation. However, the true freedom of an understanding self-consciousness does not appear to lie is mastery over the lord-like other of consumer society. The manner in which the fight club turns into a type of consumer-based, corporate style franchise with locations spread throughout the United State neatly demonstrates how easily the seed of a revolution (fight clubs) can turn into the very thing it was intended to depose.179 To put it another way, in every revolution lies the seed for its own destruction.

In order to prevent the emasculating effects of consumerism, the film, like the novel, presents a destructive solution. In both texts, it is Tyler who introduces the freeing potential of self-destruction, which is especially evidenced by the filmic Tyler who not only allows, but also encourages a mobster to savagely beat him. However, as examples of Hegelian lord-like others, both literary and filmic Tylers fail to realize an understanding self-consciousness because they never move beyond Project Mayhem’s basic goal of mastery over the other. In the film, like Joe, it is only Jack who achieves a higher level of self-realization when he finally lets go and yields to Tyler on top of the Parker-Morris building.180 Like his literary predecessor who risks his life in the context of the lord-bondman dynamic, Jack is saved because he transcends both his desiring and servant consciousness and achieves an understanding consciousness in opposition to Tyler.181

179 Pisters, The Matrix of Visual Culture (2003), 97. Pisters sees this paradox in terms of “territorialization,” “deterриториализация,” and “reterritorialization” when she writes that: “Looking at the kind of territorializations (consumption culture) and deterриториализации (the fight clubs. Tyler’s rebellious actions) in Fight Club, we also have to add that deterриториализации forces are in play as well. By the end of the film, the fight clubs have turned into a sort of terrorist organization, Project Mayhem. All members wear the same black shirts, they give up their name, except in death, when they ritually start singing ‘His name is Robert Paulsen,” and they blindly follow Tyler’s orders.”

180 Findlay, “Phenomenology: An Analysis” (1977), 520: “However, prior to this realization, a self-consciousness aims to eradicate this alien other, but, in being so set, it is both set to eliminate the other in order to achieve its own self-certainty, and also itself in the process, since it is itself that other.

181 Hegel, Phenomenology (1977), 112: “…and each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only through this mediation. The recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another.” Findlay, “Phenomenology: An Analysis” (1977), 521: “Separate consciousnesses re-enact at a higher lever the action of mutually
Similar to Kubrick’s Clockwork, Fincher’s Fight Club is missing the last chapter of Palahniuk’s novel, which reveals Joe’s cyclical, existential resignation that there is no higher stage of consciousness. However, unlike Joe, Jack does exhibit signs of an absolute consciousness that is marked by love for others. Although he is unsuccessful, it is Jack, not Joe, who makes a conscious effort to prevent Tyler from destroying the credit card buildings. What is more, at the end of the fabula, it is Jack who holds Maria’s hand and utters the rather appropriate and sardonic line: “You met me at a very strange time in my life” (35).

Unlike the novel, we get the sense that the anti-hero protagonist can now peacefully coexist with the world and help bring its members to their next stage of consciousness with the wisdom he has gained from his experience. To be clear, I am not arguing that Jack has achieved absolute consciousness, but only that, unlike Joe, he shows signs of attaining it.

soliciting forces which, in soliciting each other, in effect put themselves forth. Each uses the other as the means by which it achieves self-consciousness.”