Fight Club Takes a Beating: Masculinity, Masochism and the Politics of Disavowal

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With the release of David Fincher's *Fight Club* in the aftermath of the Columbine high school killings, fears about representational violence resounded in the popular press. This response was not surprising in that *Fight Club* tells the story of an unnamed narrator and the nihilistic Tyler Durden (later revealed to be the narrator's alter ego) who organise fistfights to rid men of their emasculation caused by a feminising commodity culture and an eroded paternal authority. In other words, violence is posited as a means of remasculinisation, although it is enduring pain rather than inflicting it that affirms virility. What concerned most critics was the fear that the film's gratuitous representation of violence might have a profoundly disturbing effect on the young men the film was marketed at.[1] Other critics, however, praised it for its innovative postmodern style along with its exposure of the alienation and disillusion that 'wage slaves' feel in American society.[2] Despite these conflicting responses, what most reviewers shared was a sense that *Fight Club* was one of many contemporary films depicting 'masculinity in crisis'.[3]

Any film that is interpreted as a film about troubled masculinity is bound to be of interest to feminist film criticism, if only because it shatters the illusion of phallic male mastery and reveals masculinity to be a volatile category stabilised via performance, and/or ideological and discursive practices.[4] Film is often seen as a privileged site for disrupting ontologically gendered categories because of its mobilisation of fluid identifications and fantasies. Thus one productive approach for feminist criticism analysing Hollywood's representations of masculinity has been the identification of textual ruptures and tensions, and an analysis of what collective social and cultural anxieties they might represent.

However, Hollywood has an uncanny knack of containing contradictions or

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subversion in its inscription of sexual difference, either vis-à-vis appropriation or narrative closure. It is with this in mind that I disagree with Susan Faludi, who commends *Fight Club* for revealing that men now must "contend with a world stripped of a socially useful male role and saturated with commercial images of masculinity." Faludi further argues that because the narrator is reunited with a woman (Marla) in the final scene, *Fight Club* "ends up as a quasi-feminist tale, seen through masculine eyes" where "the man and the woman clasp hands in what could be a mutual redemption". Far from suggesting a rapprochement between men and women, the final scene of the film, in which the narrator expels Tyler from his psyche and then unites with Marla, actually does great ideological work: it displaces the homoerotic desire that underpins the narrator's and Tyler's relationship onto narcissistic self-love and ultimately achieves an image of unified, heterosexual masculinity as narrative closure. Moreover, *Fight Club* may well screen male characters that perceive themselves to be victims of an emasculating commodity culture but, as I shall be arguing, this is accompanied by a deeply misogynist sentiment and a desire for lost paternal authority.

I will also be exploring the relationship between the pleasure that *Fight Club* takes in screening male victimisation and its discourse on male masochism. While masochism has largely been regarded as a feminine condition – indeed, for Freud, masochism was only pathological in men, since he seemed to regard masochism as a defining characteristic of femininity – in *Fight Club*, masochism becomes the means by which the male characters assert phallic mastery over themselves. It is also instrumental in the film's disavowal of homoerotic desire. In analysing *Fight Club's* negotiation of masculinity through masochism, I will be drawing both on psychoanalytic theory and Nick Mansfield's recent use of the term to refer not only to a psychoanalytic sexual category but also to cultural and political discourses and practices (72). If Mansfield's definition of masochism as a mode of power that consolidates itself through disavowal (xi) is applied to *Fight Club*, it becomes apparent that the film is structured around masochism both at the diegetic level of men claiming mastery through physical pain and abuse, and more figuratively, in the film's disavowal of white heterosexual privilege. Ultimately, while the film may appear to be screening 'masculinity in crisis', that crisis is not only contained but also used to legitimise a marginalisation of women and an assertion of phallic power even as the film laments male disfranchisement.

Steve Neale has claimed that "masculinity, as an ideal at least, is implicitly known" (19). It would seem that the unnamed narrator of *Fight Club* mourns the loss of that ideal, a loss that is blamed on consumerism, the commodification of the male body, emasculating mothers and absent fathers. Before his creation of Tyler Durden, the narrator is "a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct" and suffers from chronic insomnia laced with an elaborately scripted death wish fantasy – death, at least, would rescue him from the monotony and inauthenticity of his "single-serving life". Simply put, the narrator is firmly characterised as a

masochist from the opening scenes. He is cured by experiencing "real pain" – the relationship between pain and masculinisation being established early on in the film – when he visits the self-help group for sufferers of testicular cancer, 'Remaining Men Together'. There he finds comfort crying in the arms of Bob, who has lost his testicles to cancer and grown what the narrator misogynistically calls "bitch tits" in response to hormone treatment: if the figurative emasculation of men were not sufficiently obvious, in Bob it is cruelly literalised.

Tyler Durden, the narrator's uncanny double, emerges after the narrator's homoerotic pleasure in crying "pressed against Bob's tits" is ruined by the intrusion of a woman, Marla, upon this male arena.[5] Tyler represents the narrator's desire for a masculinity unfettered by lack and free of any taints of the feminine, be that a feminising commodity culture or women themselves. In other words, he is the narrator's phallic ideal. As Tyler explains to him: "I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck. I am capable, smart and most importantly, free in ways you are not." As ego ideal, like the punishing superego of Freud's moral masochist, Tyler encourages the narrator and other equally masochistic members of fight club to assume a position of abjection, telling them that they are not "a beautiful, unique snowflake" but "the same decaying, organic matter as everything else. We are the all singing, all dancing crap of the world. We are all part of the same compost heap." Yet this debasement, far from further disempowering the men, allows them to see themselves as disenfranchised victims. Indeed, whereas his namesake, Watt Tyler, was the leader of the 1381 English Peasants' Revolt, Tyler believes himself to be living in a postmodern consumer world bereft of master narratives and historical events:

> We are the middle children of history with no purpose or place. Our generation has no Great Depression, no Great War. Our war is spiritual. Our depression is our lives... We have been raised by television to believe that we'll be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars – but we won't... And we're very, very pissed off.[6]

What Tyler seems to be suggesting is that suffering, whether caused by a war or an economic depression, is a constitutive characteristic of masculinity. Robbed of these opportunities to prove themselves, fight club offers men an exclusively male space where they can regain their lost masculinity by literally beating themselves back to life. In fact, while suffering has more commonly been culturally aligned with a feminine position, here the endurance of pain is presented as something men do better than women. This masochistic valorisation of suffering is inextricable from Tyler's positing of men – and predominantly Caucasian, white-collar workers at that – as the real victims of commodity culture. While seemingly denouncing the social alienation that capitalism thrives on, Tyler actually precludes discussion of the brutality of the state and the lived oppression of women, African-Americans, racial/ethnic minorities, the gay community and other marginalised groups under a capitalist system. To erase

the suffering of others whilst proclaiming one's own victimisation is a strategy that enables a denial of the privileges of white heterosexuality even as it performs the totalising act of subsuming all differences under the guise of 'white male as victim'. It thus permits a disavowal of the fact that the homosociality of Tyler's fight club is only achieved through an eradication of difference – an exclusion of women, a denial of homosexual desire and a negation of racial difference.

Sharon Willis has claimed the contemporary figure of masculinity in crisis "is really white heterosexual masculinity desperately trying to reconstruct itself within a web of social differences, where its opposing terms include not only femininity, but black masculinity and male homosexuality" (31). This is obviously the case in *Fight Club*, where the discourse on "masculinity in crisis" legitimises not only the exclusion of women but also the blaming of women for this perceived emasculation. The figure of the (literally) castrating woman is mentioned early in the film when the narrator's flat explodes and Tyler flippantly retorts: "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." More seriously, when discussing his father, who left home when he was a child, Tyler blames mothers for unmanning their sons: "We are a generation of men raised by women and I'm beginning to wonder whether another woman is really the answer to what we need." This rejection of the feminine can be read through Kriseva's theory of the abject, the abject being anything that threatens or disturbs the subject's bodily and psychic boundaries. According to Kristeva, the maternal body represents ultimate abjection for the male subject because he always fears his "very own identity sinking irretrievably into the mother" (*Powers* 64). Kristeva thus posits the father as the necessary third term that breaks the mother-child dyad of the Imaginary and propels the child into the symbolic order.[7]

In Kristeva's formulation, as Tania Modleski points out, the more abject the male subject feels, the more he desires paternal law to rescue him (68). Consequently, the desire for the lost father that underlies *Fight Club* can be explained by the narrator's fear of the abject feminine. However, although Kristeva considers the paternal third term to be necessary to save the child from abjection, she has also disagreed with theorists such as Christopher Lasch who blame psychic discontent on a crisis in the paternal function (Lebeau 108). In *The Culture of Narcissus*, Christopher Lasch attacks commodity culture for moral decline and a new culture of narcissism that "erodes all forms of patriarchal authority and ... weakens the social superego, formerly represented by fathers, teachers, preachers" (11). Lasch further claims that the decline in institutionalised authority has brought about a "punitive superego that derives most of its psychic energy, in the absence of authoritative prohibitions, from the destructive, aggressive impulses within the id" (11-12). Unlike Kristeva, *Fight Club* seems to share Lasch's fears that a decline in phallic paternal authority will cause an asocial superego vulnerable to the passions of the id. In fact, it is certainly possible to read Tyler as the masochistic narrator's uncontrollable id – an embodi-

ment of his wildest impulses and most self-destructive desires.

Fight Club's lament for the absent father is inseparable from the anxiety about women that prevails throughout the film, the feminine being a reminder of both castration and the abject maternal body. While the narrator courts the abject plenitude of the mother-child dyad, he does so in the arms of a man – Bob: "Lost in oblivion. Dark and silent and complete. I found freedom. Losing all hope was freedom." That he finds this loss of self pleasurable is some indication of his masochistic desire for death; yet, the fact that this illusion of completeness is found in the arms of a man also implies not only his repressed homoerotic desire but also his fear of the feminine. This fear goes some way to explaining why he can only sleep with Marla as Tyler, and why even then, Tyler wears protective rubber gloves. It also accounts for the figure of the castrating woman that lurks in the film despite the general absence of female characters (Marla merely being an object of exchange that cements homosocial desire[8]). In fact, it is possible to read the exclusion of women as evidence of a fetishistic disavowal of sexual difference which is disguised by the narrator's / Tyler's insistence on male victimisation.

If the homosociality of fight club is achieved by the exclusion of the feminine, actual differences between men are similarly ignored. There are non-white males in Tyler's fight club but there is no recognition of their different lived experiences; in fact, fight club is actually figured as a means of securing racial rapprochement, in that white men and black men fight on equal terms and then shake hands.[9] As regards homosexuality, which is never directly mentioned but frequently implied, the only character that is coded gay through his dyed blond hair is pulverised by the narrator.[10] This erasure of differences and concomitant disavowal of white male privilege shares a similar ideological project to that of The Patriot Movement that David Savran describes in his analysis of a new powerful figure in American culture – "the white man as victim" (4). Savran argues that The Patriot Movement, which carried out the Oklahoma bombing in 1995, shocked the American population precisely because it was made up of white working and middle class men who believed themselves to be victims of the social and economic progress made in the last 30 years by women, African-Americans and racial / ethnic / sexual minorities (4). Tyler's Project Mayhem, a campaign of destruction directed at huge corporations, bears an uncanny resemblance to The Patriot Movement. Although Tyler's actions are criticised through the horrified reaction of the narrator, this is because of their extremity, not their sentiment. Indeed, Tyler's formulation of (white) male victimisation is never questioned.

For Savran, the 'white man as victim' is a common figure in contemporary American cinema and epitomised by films such as *Rambo* (George Cosmatos, 1985), *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993) and *Disclosure* (Adrian Lyne, 1994). *Fight Club* is certainly another example of a film that seems to take masochistic pleasure in screening white male suffering. In fact, far from deconstructing white heterosexual masculinity, the representation of 'masculinity in crisis'

in *Fight Club* actually valorises that crisis in order to erase all difference and allow the white male subject to disavow the power that he wields. In this respect, *Fight Club* shares the same mode as Nick Mansfield's cultural usage of the term masochism to define a "model of power that can strengthen itself by self-renunciation, that can advance itself by acts of denial, even self-humiliation" (xi). Mansfield also reads masochism as the model for a subjectivity that completely disregards, annihilates or assimilates difference in its attempt to assume the position of total subject:

> He [the masochist subject] enjoys his power only as it is performed as powerlessness. He is both poles of those oppositions at once. He is similarly both self and other, masculine and feminine. He enjoys pain and pleasure in the one act. Activity and passivity are indistinguishable in him. The masochistic subject defies logic in more ways than one. Put simply, he has no single stable subject-position. He is simultaneously many and mutually contradictory subjectivities and microsubjectivities. He consolidates and fragments himself at one and the same time. As well as this, he remains a consistent narrating core, able to produce his experience as literature throughout. Contrary to the post-structuralist logic of the dispersal of the subject the masochist never decentres himself without simultaneously centering and strengthening himself... the masochist subject dismantles his traditional autonomous subjectivity without ever producing himself as radical difference. This is the structure of indifference. (10)

This could equally be a description of Tyler / the narrator who refuses all difference – not only sexual difference or the disproportions of power between the white heterosexual male and his others, but also the distinctions between all binary oppositions. Even the self / other dichotomy is violated by the narrator's setting up of an alter ego in the place of the Other.

It is this flagrant disregard of binary operations, especially the male / active vs feminine / passive structuring framework of patriarchal thought, that has led some psychoanalytic theorists to view masochism as subversive of phallic masculinity. Gilles Deleuze and Kaja Silverman, for instance, have both drawn such conclusions from interpretations of Freud's account of the male beating fantasy in "A Child is Being Beaten". This male fantasy, which Freud later termed "feminine masochism",[11] has three phrases, the second of which is unconscious and reconstructed by Freud: I am being loved by my father; I am being beaten by my father; I am being beaten by my mother. According to Freud, the second phase of the fantasy is repressed because of its homosexual content, homosexuality obviously being more culturally unacceptable than masochism, which remains conscious (175). What Freud finds remarkable about the third phase of the fantasy is that "it has for its content a feminine attitude without a homosexual object-choice" (187). For Silverman, therefore, it is a fantasy with a feminine yet

heterosexual male subject which "wreaks havoc with sexual difference" (212). In desiring domination by a woman (the mother), Silverman argues, the male subject cannot admit to masochism without seriously questioning his identification with the masculine position; the male masochist is therefore a subject who "radiates a negativity inimical to the social order" (206). Deleuze sees this fantasy as equally subversive but disagrees with Freud's construction of the second unconscious phase of the fantasy. He claims that, in fact, the masochist requires punishment from the oral, sadistic mother for his resemblance to the father: "hence the father is not so much the beater as the beaten" (60-61). Thus the male masochist subject still negates power and privilege, which is handed over to the woman, but does not want to take the father's place.

But in *Fight Club* there is no such negation of male power or the paternal function. Firstly, Tyler (who articulates the narrator's repressed desires) may claim that when fighting he imagines he is beating his father and therefore being beaten by him, but here Tyler simultaneously assumes both an active (sadistic) and passive (masochistic) position in relation to paternal law. Moreover, while one could argue along with Deleuze that it is the father in Tyler / the narrator that is being beaten, this beating of the father is inseparable from the film's lament for lost paternal authority that I analysed above.[12] Indeed, the father is being beaten because he is the wrong kind of father, a non-phallic father who left the narrator to be raised exclusively by his mother. Put another way, the father may well be beaten but only ultimately to be replaced, in the narrator's case, by his ego ideal / substitute father, Tyler, who offers a more masculine form of paternal authority.

However, these analyses ignore the ways in which masochism can be translated into cultural and textual practices outside of the realm of the Oedipal family structure that retains the father as the constant point of reference.[13] For instance, sadomasochism has become a specific historical, cultural and recreational sexual practice, especially among the gay and lesbian community, where the subversive impact of S/M is not only the denaturalisation of femininity's and masculinity's relation to power, but the fact that one can alternate from role to role. Thus, unlike Silverman's analysis that is limited to Oedipal relations, the radical nature of masochism is not expressed in terms of the masculine subject's relation to paternal law but because sadomasochistic role play exposes the performative nature of all gender roles.[14] Other theorists have regarded masochism as a locus of power that disguises itself. Parveen Adams, for instance, has argued that "though [the male masochist] may appear victim, he is in fact in charge. He is the stage manager in charge of the scenery, the costumes and the roles" (253). In response to Silverman, Judith Butler has also stated that if masochism is culturally situated, it may be "a strategy of phallic self-aggrandisement" ("Interview" 88). Similarly, Mansfield claims that in disavowing difference and establishing a total subject, masochism might prove to be "a way for masculine hegemonic systems to confirm their own power, and annihilate the other, while performing a loud, even self-mutilating, powerlessness" (51).

Fight Club is a prime example of how in cinematic representation masochism may function as a means of consolidating phallic power. While the film uses a masochistic mode of power in proclaiming '(white) male as victim', on a diegetic level, masochism is also the means by which the male characters achieve self-mastery. As the narrator tells us: "a guy came to fight club for the first time, his arse was a lot of cookie dough. After a few weeks, he was carved out of wood." Here, the soft, domestic, feminised body gives way to a body that is firm, scarred and more importantly forged by physical abuse. Even though this could give *Fight Club* a subversive edge in that the film suggests masculinity is not a quality that the male subject necessarily inhabits but one that is acquired, the film's ultimate project is to locate masculinity in the physicality of the wrestling body, a physicality that is marked as an exclusively male privilege. The beating and mutilation of the body even achieves male redemption: "When fight club was over, nothing was solved but nothing mattered. Afterwards we all felt saved." As the smiling handshakes and embraces after fights indicate, being pounded to the point of collapse offers not only deliverance but also pleasure. This is made abundantly clear when Tyler not only fails to retaliate when beaten by Lou the Mafia boss but also laughs out loud, seemingly enjoying the abuse. Then, dripping blood in Lou's face, Tyler terrifies Lou with the threat of AIDS: "You don't know where I've been." Lou panics and swiftly exits. Here Tyler achieves power by seemingly rescinding it and then, more actively, threatening Lou not physically but with his potential homosexuality. This scene is exemplary of the disruption caused to binary thought by a subject who finds pleasure in pain, mastery in surrender, power in submission.

The inscription of masochism as a means of male redemption is extra-textually reiterated by director David Fincher, who interestingly describes film making as a "masochistic endeavour" (G. Smith). Despite insisting that his film is a satire, Fincher echoes the narrator's exaltation of a battered, bleeding body brought to life through being beaten: "When somebody hits you in the mouth and you get that first rinse of salty something under your tongue, and you spit into your hand to see what it is, you are truly alive in the moment. It's not an orgasm, but it's a very specific reality" (quoted in Gristwood). Brad Pitt and Edward Norton, when interviewed in *Premiere Magazine*, publicised the film by expressing similar joyous pride at the various injuries they suffered during filming:

> So Brad and Norton worked with a trainer, but not so that they would look good. They trained to get into getting hit. "I clipped you once, didn't I?" Pitt asks Norton. "In the face. Just enough to wake you up."
>
> "I cracked my thumb on Brad one time," Norton says. "On his stomach." (This is too good to be true. Have you seen Pitt's stomach?)
>
> "And we both caught knees in the chest," Norton continues. "Cracked ribs. Just had the wind knocked out."
>
> "That's how cool we are," Pitt says.
>
> "You obviously can't cut loose," Norton says. "But we shot some

> things wide enough that there was no way to fake it. That's when it got a bit..."
>
> "Unchoreographed," Pitt finishes, gleefully. (Schneller)

Again, 'coolness', which can roughly be translated as virility here, is grounded not so much in violence against others but in violence against the self. In fact, it would seem that contemporary representations of masculinity are necessarily bound up in images of physical suffering, pain and endurance. As Joe Queenan has argued,

> no leading man in American history [has] ever become a major movie star without first getting his face beaten to a pulp on camera. For whatever the reason, the film-going public has stipulated that a celluloid head stomping, flogging, blinding, dismemberment, or crucifixion is an essential, nay unavoidable, rite of cinematic passage, and that it will not canonise a rising star until he has officially taken his lumps on screen.

The prevalence of the mutilated male body in cinema suggests that masochism functions as ruse that not only consolidates images of phallic masculinity but also enables patriarchy to contain the subversive within its hegemonic structure. Paul Willemen, for instance, has analysed how in the films of Anthony Mann, the mutilation of the male body is used to negate the feminising potential of the male body on display:

> The viewer's experience is predicated on the pleasure of seeing the male "exist" (that is walk, move, ride, fight) in and though cityscapes, landscapes or, more abstractly, history. And on the unquiet pleasure of seeing the male mutilated (often quite graphically in Mann) and *restored through violent brutality.* [my italics] (16)

Here, the mutilation of the male body remasculinises the male subject after his objectification precisely because the ability to endure pain acts as a signifier of virility. In fact, anxiety over the male body as spectacle explains why all action films that display the hypermasculine bodies of bodybuilding stars such as Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jean-Claude van Damme make that body suffer to the limits of endurance before it emerges triumphant.[15]

The displacement of the specular onto physical mutilation that Willemen locates in Mann's films is mirrored quite self-consciously by *Fight Club*. The most obvious example, of course, is Bob, the ex-bodybuilder. Male bodybuilding violates a masculine / active, feminine / passive visual economy, and the placing of the male body on display is often designated as feminine because of its implied narcissism. Yvonne Tasker, for example, quotes an article from the *Guardian* on *Rambo*, which claimed Stallone's "enormous breasts loom over the screen like Jane Russell in *The Outlaw*" (80). In *Fight Club*, this same logic is

taken to extremes when Bob loses his testicles because of his use of anabolic steroids when a bodybuilding champion and then grows "bitch tits" in response to hormone treatment. In other words, Bob is punished by the narrative for willingly assuming an exhibitionist position. Nonetheless, Bob manages to restore his manhood through brutal fistfights that leave his body damaged but remasculinised. As Bob tells the narrator, he no longer needs 'Remaining Men Together' – he's found something better.

That masochism provides an answer to the feminising commodification of the male body is further apparent when the narrator ridicules the sculpted body of a male model in a Gucci underwear advertisement, asking "Is that what a man looks like?" Tyler replies with a grin "Self-improvement is masturbation. Now self-destruction...?"[16] What is ironic about this scene, of course, is the fact that it is Brad Pitt, the sex symbol, who decries self-improvement, even though he spends half of the film strutting around bare-chested, revealing the muscular wash-board stomach that won him fame in *Thelma and Louise.* Moreover, Tyler is feminised by his attire at some points in the film, such as when he wanders into the kitchen of the house on Paper Street in a towelling dressing gown and women's moccasin slippers. Nonetheless, the film still manages to contain this possible subversion because, unlike the Gucci model, who is pure spectacle, the potential feminisation of the male body in *Fight Club* (Pitt's included) is displaced by the physicality of fistfights. That is, the male body bears the scars of its sadomasochistic investment in a manner reminiscent of Willemen's analysis of Mann's films. In fact, even when Tyler orders the narrator's (that is his own) castration as punishment for wanting to close fight club, the "space monkeys", who understand no difference between the narrator and Tyler, do not see this desire for castration as feminising but as an act of courage and self-sacrifice that demands the greatest respect. In other words, in *Fight Club*, even a demand for castration can be screened without damaging the male subject.

The way in which mutilation can be a means of masculinisation is perhaps clearest in the scene where Tyler sears an imprint of his kiss into the narrator's hand with lye, telling him "without pain, without sacrifice we have nothing". Tyler's easy slippage from pain to sacrifice, where the lye burn leaves the narrator writhing in agony but only so that he may "hit bottom" and find freedom, reveals the extent to which masculinity is often negotiated though a discourse on sacrifice and endurance. However, whereas on first viewing this appears to show Tyler sadistically leading the narrator to self-realisation and masculinisation, the dénouement of *Fight Club* (where Tyler and the narrator are revealed to be two sides of the same person) means that it has to be *retrospectively* read as self-abuse or what Freud termed 'reflexive masochism'. As Freud explains in "Instincts and their Vicissitudes", reflexive masochism is "masochism which is situated between masochism and sadism, where the subject enjoys pain without assuming a passive position" (125). It is this refusal of passivity that leads Kaja Silverman to argue that reflexive masochism "is ideally suited for negotiating the contradictions inherent in masculinity. The male subject can indulge his appetite

for pain without at the same time calling into question either his virility, or his paternal lineage" (326). Although I would argue that no representation of masochism in *Fight Club* poses a threat to the male subject, reflexive masochism certainly allows the protagonist to inhabit both poles of the sadomasochistic economy simultaneously rather than alternating from role to role. In other words, instead of Tyler administering pain in order to masculinise the narrator, what the scene retrospectively reveals is the narrator actively subjugating and punishing the feminine part of his own psyche.[17]

The displacement of sadomasochistic scenes between two men onto self-mutilation not only enables the illusion of an autonomous male subject but also facilitates the retrospective disavowal of homoerotic desire between the narrator and Tyler. Indeed, certain parallels might be drawn here to Freud's beating fantasy where the masochistic content of the boy's fantasy remains conscious but the homoerotic content is repressed. Thus it would seem that homosexuality poses a greater threat to the male subject than masochism (which may even be an essential component of that masculinity). A similar point about Freud's male beating fantasy is made by David Savran who claims that its repressed homosexual content and desire for the father indicates how "masochism functions, in short, as a mode of cultural production that simultaneously reveals and conceals (through the mechanism of disavowal) the homoeroticism that undergrids patriarchy and male homosocial relations" (32). *Fight Club* participates in a similar mechanism of disavowal by displacing homoerotically charged moments, such as Tyler's kiss, onto a desexualised administering of pain (the pouring of lye) and retrospectively, by deflecting homoerotic desire onto narcissism.

This disavowal allows the film to flirt with homosexual desire without compromising its final image of a unified, heterosexual protagonist. These flirtations revolve around the erotic triangle that is established when Tyler begins to sleep with Marla and the narrator worries about competing for Tyler's attention. Marla, an interesting double to the narrator with similar masochistic tendencies, is undeveloped as a character except insofar as she functions as an object of exchange that cements homoerotic desire. This is made shamelessly clear when, in a parody of the primal scene, the narrator tries to spy on Marla and Tyler having sex; Tyler, naked except for rubber gloves, asks "Do you want to finish her off?"[18] The homoerotic desire that underpins the narrator's feelings for Tyler are most explicit, though, when Tyler ruffles the hair of the blond recruit and the narrator's hollow voiceover mournfully informs us "I am Jack's inflamed sense of rejection" and later "I am all alone. My father left me. Tyler left me. I am Jack's broken heart." The narrator's subsequent hysterical pulverising of the blond man's face is first seen to stem from pathological jealousy intent on disfiguring the object of Tyler's affection. Indeed, the narrator's explanation that "I wanted to destroy something beautiful" is patently unconvincing. Retrospectively, though, when it is remembered that Tyler *is* the narrator (or at least his repressed desires), the narrator's violent attack would seem to origina-

te in his anger at the blond man for arousing his desire. If this is the case, then it is possible that the narrator created Tyler to overcome his longing for other men and to allow him to sleep with women. Indeed, in the novel, the narrator admits "I know why Tyler had occurred. Tyler loved Marla. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed to be with Marla" (198). What he never explains is why he couldn't sleep with Marla without Tyler. Likewise, when Tyler claims "I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck," the film suggests that Tyler is not just an ego ideal that is attractive and complete but also heterosexual. In keeping with this, the narrative closure of the film – where by eliminating Tyler and uniting with Marla the narrator gains unified, heterosexual masculinity – is only achieved by a repression of its homoerotic content.

Yet it is not only its intradiegetic homoerotic content that the film attempts to repress but also any potential extradiegetic homoerotic desire caused by the sight of the male body on display. Most critical discussions of the male body have been in dialogue with Laura Mulvey's seminal text "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Mulvey's text has been considerably critiqued both for maintaining a rigid active / masculine, passive / feminine dichotomy and for separating identification from desire. However, as the narrator's feelings for Tyler demonstrate, identification need not necessarily exclude desire. In fact, just as in Mulvey's Lacanian schema one of the pleasures of cinema is narcissistic identification – identifying with the unified protagonist who acts as ego ideal and allows us to feel complete in a manner reminiscent of the misrecognition of the mirror stage – the narrator's feelings for Tyler (as his ego ideal) reflect not only the narcissistic pleasures of cinematic spectatorship but also the fact that one might simultaneously identify with and desire a screen protagonist.

Fight Club offers further self-reflexive comment on male-male spectatorship through the relay of gazes that operates during the fistfights. As Tyler informs the men in fight club, there are only two men to a fight, one fight at a time, and all participants have to remove their shirts and shoes. Thus part of the pleasure of fight club (both intra- and extradiegetically) is *watching* half-naked men beating each other and being beaten. Whereas Mulvey would read this pleasure through a sadistic, mastering gaze, other theorists who consider identification to be more fluid than Mulvey have argued that part of the pleasure of spectatorship might well be masochistic.[19] Moreover, in films like *Fight Club*, where the male body is constantly on display, the mutilation of that body has a more ideological function than merely offering a pleasurable masochistic identification with suffering. As Steve Neale has argued, in Hollywood films, masochism provides a means of offering up the pleasurable spectacle of the male body in a homophobic, patriarchal culture where the male body cannot be marked as an erotic object of another male look (281); that is, the bruised, pulverised, penetrated body may act as a fetish that allows any pleasure in the contemplation of the male body to be disavowed. Neale's reading goes some way to explaining why Hollywood action films often find some means by which to divest the male

protagonist of his shirt (or at least wear a wet or tight shirt) while he wrestles with his adversary. A hyperbolic example of this is *Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, 1987) when Riggs (Mel Gibson) not only rips his shirt off for no apparent reason, but also grapples with his enemy, Joshua, in wet mud under a jet of water spurting out from a broken hydrant.

Further, as Willemen has claimed, in order to disqualify the male body as erotic object, the spectator's gaze is most often mediated through the look of other characters who express fear, aggression or hatred but certainly not desire (16). This is certainly the case in *Fight Club*, where the potential erotic charge of bare-chested men grappling with each other is abrogated through the intervening shots of male spectators aggressively goading the fight on. Only the narrator watches Tyler without aggression and a slight smile on his lips, but any hint of desire is later negated when we discover that, like Reik's exhibitionist masochist, the narrator is merely imagining watching himself.[20]

This repression necessary for Hollywood representations of the male body, like all repression, necessarily leaves an excess that Paul Smith has termed "a residual, barely avowed male hysteria" (91). For Smith, this hysterical residue is the "unresolved or unconfined representation of the body as it exceeds the narrative process" (92). In *Fight Club*, though, the hysteria reaches huge proportions. The narrator even employs this term himself when he compares the spectators' aggressive, galvanising jeers to "the hysterical shouting in tongues like a Pentecostal Church". Moreover, the film attempts not just to disavow the intra- and extradiegtic homoerotic pleasure obtained from gazing upon the male body but also the eroticised scenes between the narrator and Tyler. In fact, *Fight Club* is exemplary of what Geoffrey Nowell-Smith has termed a hysterical text – one in which the repressed sexual content of a film results in narrative incoherencies, where the resolution fails to accommodate the excess, and realist representative conventions break down (73-4). The final scenes, for example, that are mediated through a closed circuit camera rather than the narrator's subjective point of view, show a hysterical protagonist who shouts at himself, wrestles himself, smashes himself into walls, and throws himself down stairs. After these scenes, the abrupt ending, where by shooting himself in the side of the head the narrator secures not only psychic unity but also, with the ushering in of Marla, heterosexuality, fails to subsume this male hysteria. The fact that Palahniuk's novel ends differently, with the narrator confined to a psychiatric hospital, is some indication of Hollywood's need for heterosexual coupling as narrative closure, even at the expense of hysterical excess.

Despite this male hysteria, the ending attempts to screen a triumphant assertion of masculinity no longer in crisis; the narrator's heterosexuality is confirmed and his self-destructive act of shooting himself in the head arouses the unqualified praise of the space monkeys who regard it as proof of his masculine resilience. If we were in any further need of understanding the phallic mastery that underlies this masochistic moment, while the narrator and Marla hold hands to watch Project Mayhem's destruction of nine credit card compa-

nies, two frames of a semi-erect penis are spliced into the film, a self-reflexive joke, of course, which refers to Tyler's habit of splicing male genitalia into family movies when he worked as a projectionist.

This self-referentiality, which runs throughout *Fight Club*, is indicative of the delight the film takes in its groundbreaking postmodern aesthetic. The sheer pace of the images which, according to Fincher, have to be "downloaded" (G. Smith); the digitally created photography that allows the spectator to hurtle from the interior of the narrator's brain to the barrel of a gun lodged in his mouth or plunge down the side of a building and back again; the sex scene filmed as a special effect; the IKEA catalogue that emerges in the narrator's living room; the exploitation of taboo subjects; the aestheticisation of violence; the unreliable narrator, all contribute to the film's innovative postclassical style. Even the penis in the self-reflexive ending is a plastic prosthetic used to gain the film an R-rating,[21] proving the narrator's postmodern anxiety that everything (even the phallus?) "is a copy of a copy of a copy". These postmodern elements are also inseparable from the pleasure the film derives in breaking all conventions, be it the penis frames, the exaltation of physical abuse, Tyler's donning of rubber gloves in the sex scene or his urinating in soup. While an anti-authoritative, radical sentiment would normally be a laudable project, in *Fight Club* the effect is one of depoliticisation; *Fight Club* is definitely 'in your face' but devoid of real social critique. Fincher reiterated time and time again in the press that his film should be taken as a comedy or satire, and Chuck Palahniuk said of the film "I think people are taking it far too seriously" (quoted in Sragow). Despite the extremity of the media's reaction, *Fight Club* is indeed a film that in many ways is difficult to take seriously; while it censures commodity culture, the director found fame directing advertisements and pop videos; while it critiques the commodification of the male body, the main star (Brad Pitt) is a renowned sex symbol; while it flirts with controversial ideas such as nihilism, self-destruction, anarchy and homoerotic desire, in the end, Tyler is just a figment of the narrator's imagination, and in any case, ultimately, the film is just a satire.

This deliberate refusal of its own seriousness can be linked not only to the film's postmodern stylistics but also to its investment in masochism. Several theorists have recently pointed to the similarity between the masochistic subject and the (subjected) postmodern subject, both of which are theorised in relation to power (Mansfield 101; Stewart 4).[22] Yet, as Mansfield argues, in the postmodern era, "the forthright structural ownership of power has given way – even to those who continue to operate the most traditional power – to a permanent disavowal" (102). *Fight Club* is structured around a similar masochistic mode, where masochism functions not only as a physical means of affirming male virility but is also embedded in the film's designation of the (white) male as victim and its accompanying disavowal of white male privilege. In fact, *Fight Club* is built around disavowal, be it a disavowal of its own seriousness, a disavowal of state power, a disavowal of difference (especially sexual difference), or a disavowal of homoerotic desire. In this way, *Fight Club* bears the same organi-

sing principle as Freud's writings on masochism, especially "A Child is Being Beaten" where, like Marla, the female masochist is only interesting insofar as she illuminates male masochism, where the father is retained as an object of desire, and any homosexual content is repressed.[23] In other words, *Fight Club's* investment in masochism does not rest at a purely diegetic level; the film also employs a masochistic aesthetic structured by disavowal. Consequently, *Fight Club* can be read not only as a hysterical text but also a masochistic text, one that engineers a triumph of phallic mastery even as it deconstructs itself and performs 'masculinity in crisis'.

Notes

1. Anita Busch, for instance, in *The Hollywood Reporter* labelled the film "socially irresponsible" while David Denby called it a "fascistic rhapsody" in *The New Yorker*. This reading focuses on Tyler Durden's Project Mayhem, which launches a campaign of destruction at big corporations and makes soap out of human fat stolen from medical waste incinerators. See Emerson's "Punch Counterpunch".
2. Travers in *Rolling Stone*, for example, called the film "an uncompromising American Classic" (Emerson).
3. For examples, see Peter Bradshaw and Damon Wise.
4. For a discussion of the performative nature of gender, see Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.
5. Images of Tyler do flash on the screen earlier, though, when the narrator's feelings of emasculation and alienation are at their strongest – when the narrator is photocopying and complaining that "everything is a copy of a copy of a copy", when the doctor recommends that the narrator go to Remaining Men Together to cure him of insomnia, during Remaining Men Together when a man narrates how his wife left him to have children with another man, and after the appearance of Marla.
6. Although David Fincher has claimed that the film is a parody, in an interview he himself subscribes to Tyler's philosophy: "We're designed to be hunters and we're in a society of shopping, there's nothing to kill anymore, there's nothing to fight, nothing to overcome, nothing to explore. In that societal emasculation this everyman [the narrator] is created" (G. Smith).
7. Kristeva has even stated that "matricide is our vital necessity" (*Black* 27).
8. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick for an analysis of the woman's role in strengthening homosocial bonds.
9. In the only two bi-racial fights we witness, Tyler defeats his black opponent, while the narrator is beaten to a pulp but smiles and shakes his adversary's hand.
10. In the book this character is more explicitly coded homosexual. The narrator scornfully calls him Angel Face and adds "Put him in a dress and make him smile" (Palahniuk 128).

11. In "The Economic Problem of Masochism," his final word on the subject, Freud located a primary, erotogenic masochism that could be divided into feminine or moral masochism. Feminine masochism is the desire to be beaten while moral masochism is the superego's berating of the ego for failing to live up to the ego ideal.
12. In fact, in Palahniuk's novel, Tyler's dogma is that "if you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never knew your father, if your father bails out or died or is never home, what do you believe about God?" (141). The narrator elaborates: "How Tyler saw it was that getting God's attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all" (141). Therefore, the desire to be beaten might well be a desire for punishment, not for homosexual desire, but a desire simply to be noticed.
13. Bersani has critiqued Freud for reducing the destabilising energy of masochism by retaining an Oedipal framework. In Bersani's account, all sexuality is seen as masochistic and subversive because it brings about the subject's undoing (41).
14. See Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and the Samois Collective (ed.) *Coming to Power*.
15. For a discussion of different interpretations of the hypermasculine body see Yvonne Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies* chapter 6.
16. In the book this reads as "Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer ... Maybe self-destruction is the answer" (49). Amy Taubin argues this may have been changed in the film as a concession to the MPAA ratings board (16).
17. For a reading of how "reflexive sadomasochism" works similarly in *Rambo* see Savran (197-206).
18. This scene can be read as a perverse primal scene, especially in view of the fact that the narrator had previously compared Tyler and Marla to his mother and father. Silverman reads the child as a victim in the primal scene (157-184) and the narrator's spying is masochistic in that he experiences intense jealousy.
19. D.N. Rodowick, for instance, claims that in formulating a sadistic male spectator who engages in fetishistic scopophilia to disavow castration, Mulvey ignored the masochistic potential of that fetishism: "Mulvey defines fetishistic scopophilia as an overvaluation of the object, a point which Freud would support. But he would also add that this phenomenon is one of the fundamental sources of authority defined as passive submission to the object, in sum, masochism" (7). Similarly, in her analysis of the horror genre, which she regards as victim-identified, Carol Clover has argued that any pleasure that the spectator obtains in watching bodies being mutilated is masochistic as well as sadistic. The same is undoubtedly true of both the intra- and extradiegetic levels of spectatorship in *Fight Club*, a film which takes pleasure in screening battered, bleeding bodies and abject images such as bags of human body fat removed by liposuction. There are also numerous links psychoanalysis makes between masochism and spectatorship. Reik claimed that maso-

chism, the most exhibitionist of perversion, demands a third term, a spectator (72), a point *Fight* Club seem to substantiate when the narrator watches himself fighting either as himself or Tyler. Moreover, in the third phase of Freud's beating fantasy, the girl imagines herself spectating while a group of boys are being beaten. The girl identifies with the boys so that the fantasy reveals the cross-gender identification that Laura Mulvey ignores. Further, as Freud explains, while the form of the fantasy is sadistic, "the satisfaction that is derived from it is masochistic" ("A Child" 177).

20. See note 19.
21. "The penis that flickers briefly in one scene is actually a prosthetic. In order for the film to get an R-rating, claims Palahniuk, the penis could not be erect or have a hand, mouth or any other body part in the frame, and it had to feature black pubic hair 'so no one would think it was Brad's.' So the perfect penis had to be fabricated – the film's one, crowning moment of anarchy is just an expensive fake" (Wise).
22. As Mansfield and Stewart both point out, Foucault's subject is regulated by power, Lacan's subject is subjected to language and the Symbolic, and Barthes' subject is inherently contradictory. Stewart argues that according to postmodern thought, masochism "lays bare the mechanism by which all subjectivity is constituted" (4).
23. In the book Marla shares the narrator's morbid fascination with death, burns herself with cigarettes and wears Tyler's lye burn. Unlike male masochism, however, her masochistic desires are given no philosophical, Nietzchean dimensions.

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Το *Fight Club* δέχεται κτύπημα: αρρενωπότητα, μαζοχισμός και η πολιτική της αποκήρυξης

Nicola Rehling

Το άρθρο αυτό εξετάζει τη σχέση αρρενωπότητας και μαζοχισμού στην ταινία *Fight Club* του David Fincher. Μολονότι κάποιοι κριτικοί έχουν υποστηρίξει ότι ο ανδρικός μαζοχισμός υπονομεύει τη φαλλική ανδρική υποκειμενικότητα, καθώς και το ίδιο το πατριαρχικό σύστημα, θεωρώ ότι, εάν η κινηματογράφηση του μαζοχισμού στο *Fight Club* τοποθετηθεί σε ένα ιστορικό πλαίσιο, όχι μόνο δίνει στην ταινία μια θέση στην συζήτηση περί διωγμού του λευκού άνδρα που ήλθε στο προσκήνιο στις Ηνωμένες Πολιτείες στη δεκαετία του '90, αλλά παρέχει επίσης μια στρατηγική για τη φαλλική ανάκαμψη του λευκού άνδρα. Με τον ίδιο τρόπο που ο μαζοχιστής μπορεί να αποκηρύξει την κυριαρχία που ενυπάρχει στην ανάληψη της θέσης του θύματος, το *Fight Club* δομείται σε πολλά επίπεδα μέσω της αποκήρυξης, η οποία είναι η αποκήρυξη του λευκού ετερόφυλου ανδρικού προνομίου, η αποκήρυξη της έσω- και έξω-διηγητικής αυτοερωτικής επιθυμίας (η οποία επιτυγχάνεται μέσω ενός μαζοχιστικού ακρωτηριασμού του ανδρικού σώματος), καθώς και η αποκήρυξη της ίδιας της της σοβαρότητας εν μέσω της μετα-μοντέρνας «σπιρτάδας».