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### The Dark Side of Ourselves: A Personal Film Review of *Fight Club*

When I play tennis, or really any sport that is extremely competitive, I have two personalities: a competitive side and an idiotic one. Whether I'm in a match or practice is what shifts my mood. During my freshmen year, my philosophy was that I was to blame for everything. If the team lost, I would blame myself, even if I had won my individual match. As the season continued my first year, my competitive nature funneled into raw anger which overtook me at times, causing me to constantly use explicit language while forcefully banging my racket frame on the ground when losing a point. My team had been aware of the temper I had adopted. They knew my racket was bound to break sometime, considering how many times I had smashed it. When the day finally came, and the frame had split into two, I realized how my emotions can heavily influence how I treat the world around me. My racket displayed how my anger-driven, shadowed personality led me to regret my actions. The breaking of my instrument showed me the detrimental potential of my alter ego.

The effects of one's multiple personalities have been portrayed on numerous occasions in feature films, each revealing the drastic consequences when people are mentally deceived by their own selves. Yet, director David Fincher approaches this theme from a different perspective in *Fight Club* by showing the alter ego in a physical form, allowing us to explore the how and why our subconscious and obscured self grows in people.

David Fincher's *Fight Club* exemplifies the detrimental effects of the alter-ego through the development of the unnamed narrator and protagonist played by Edward Norton. The

premise of the film follows the narrator who lives a mundane life until he meets Tyler Durden, played by Brad Pitt, an insane alter-ego that stems from the narrator's pressures to pursue an anti-consumerist culture, ultimately sparking their love-hate relationship. Both agree to create a fight club because it releases a kind of "euphoria" that makes them feel "alive." After months of popularity, the fight club evolves into a terrorist group, creating Project Mayhem that vandalizes in order to promote their anti-consumerist beliefs. Eventually, the narrator is at a civil war with himself until he kills Tyler Durden. Fincher blurs the fine line between reality and fiction through his use of visual metaphors ranging from the fight club itself, to the role of Tyler in his mind.

In the film, violence is a prominent characteristic. The narrator is portrayed as following a mundane work and life style until Tyler and he created fight club. The club was a way of exhausting the built up anger in those that followed the norms of society, which was everyone until Tyler manipulated them into becoming terrorists. It was different, which explained why it was so popular. It allowed each fighter to be himself in the moment. Fight club was never about the literal fighting, but rather more on the ability to exert oneself to be a freer man. The narrator and Tyler aren't concerned about the violence, but more about demonstrating expressive aggression. This field of anger can be defined as "aggression that is intentional but not meant to cause harm," according to the article "Aggression and Violence" on Goodtherapy.org. The participants in the club are not keen in hurting one another, hence why they ask for people to "tap out" or yell stop. Instead, fighting each other is their subtle way of hiding from society, until Project Mayhem calls for them to physically rebel against their culture. In an experiment conducted by the Department of Psychology at the Belarusian State University, both men and

women took a questionnaire regarding aggressive provocation. The results showed the men had significantly higher instrumental, or expressive, aggression than that of women. Respondents with instrumental aggression showed more active aggression as well, the next step up from expressive aggression. Throughout the film, we see no women in fight club, hence making it easier for the men to show active aggression eventually. This experiment highlights how fight club transformed into Project Mayhem, because their instrumental aggression became active. When I play tennis, I only stay at expressive aggression, much like fight club, because I have no need to act out. Yet, the psychology behind the experiment makes it not surprising that this group of people would turn into a terrorist organization that actively rebels. The experiment hints that men have an innate behavior to switch from expressive to active aggression, making fight club an impeccable environment to stimulate their instinctive needs.

When I was little, my brother and I created a game called “Sa” where we would try to tackle each other by whatever means necessary, often times on the trampoline so we would not hurt ourselves. Looking back, I have no idea why I participated in this. It often ended in crying, usually by me since my brother was nearly double my weight, and even at times me throwing up since he kept the chokehold on me for too long after I “tapped out.” It was an unpleasant, yet exhilarating game to play when we were too bored to watch yet another *Full House* episode. As our fight began to get heated, I would get more energetic, more foolish, and angrier. There is some hidden addiction to fighting that is evolutionary among all men, and I often embraced it. The men from fight club fight for the sake of fighting because it brings euphoria even though it does nothing to rebel against their culture, similarly to how I smashed my racket even though it did nothing to help me win the game. But, the narrator in particular is also fighting to expose a

different side of his mentality. The “Aggression and Violence” article also highlights that perpetrators of violence can have mental health issues such as borderline personality, which causes one to be involved in needless risk taking and impaired with self-direction or identity. Since a distorted personality is a byproduct of aggression, the narrator may be violent in order to bring out the Tyler Durden in his unconscious mind. Violence is perhaps a method of fueling Tyler’s influence on the narrator because the narrator unconsciously wants to be closer to Tyler at this point in the film. But *Fight Club* is more than just a method of exerting aggression. It deals with a number of underlying themes about the humanity of *being* in our work-oriented consumerist culture and why fighting serves as a symbol for a natural instinct to be in power.

*Fight Club* effectively portrays the narrator's insanity by allowing the audience to see his subconscious in a human form, Tyler. Fincher made it very clear who Tyler was in a pivotal scene known as “The Changeover.” At that point, the narrator had come to the realization that he was, in fact, two different people in the mindset of one. “All the ways you wish you could be, that’s me,” said Tyler to the narrator. Instead of an alter-ego, Tyler was more of an ideal ego because he was the freer version of the narrator. According to *Psychology: Tenth Edition* by David Myers, Sigmund Freud, a well-known psychologist, explored the psychodynamic theories of personality, which viewed human behavior as a dynamic interaction between the conscious and unconscious mind. Freud divided the personality into three traits: the id, ego, and superego. Tyler Durden is the id to the narrator because he is the “reservoir of unconscious psychic energy” that strives to satisfy fundamental sexual and aggression needs as highlighted in Freud’s psychoanalysis theory. Throughout the film, Tyler completed these needs by creating fight club and having sex with Marla, which he characterized as “sport fucking.” These traits found in

Tyler are in sync with the id because he operated on the pleasure principle. Yet, Fincher made the id a completely different person because the narrator is not able to demand immediate gratification on his own, thus the need for Tyler in his life.

When the film began, the narrator was especially close to Tyler after the narrator lost his house. Tyler was initially seen as a kind of caregiver to the narrator since he provides “housing” for the both of them, which began their profound relationship. Yet after Project Mayhem commenced, the two grew apart. Tyler was no longer in synch with the narrator's wantings when creating the terrorist group that was once fight club. A key moment in the film when the two characters part from one another in their beliefs was when Tyler took a convenience store cashier and threatened to shoot him on his knees if he did not pursue his dream of being an animal medicine practitioner. At this point, not only do we see the rift between the two characters, but we realize that Tyler desires both social power and control of the narrator’s mind. The act of threatening the cashier is a metaphor for asserting our own interests against those of consumer culture. Nearly shooting the cashier sparks the idea in the viewer’s mind that Tyler does not only want the narrator to be freer, but believes society is corrupt, explaining why he thinks Project Mayhem will make the world reach “economic equilibrium.”

*Fight Club* incorporates a series of economic doctrines used today that are resisted by Tyler’s character in order to expose the flaws in capitalism. Tyler’s economic view is quite different than those of most because his perspective is so radical in its simplicity. He is a strong opponent of Keynesian economics, as Margaret Ray and David Anderson define it in *Krugman’s Macroeconomics*. John Keynes emphasized the short-run in economics saying that we cannot wait for the economy to correct itself, and so we must increase aggregate demand by simply

consuming more. Keynes's theory has been accepted by a broad range of the political spectrum because it simply makes sense. However, Tyler is violently opposed to Keynesian economics since it focuses too much on consumerism and fiscal policy to run the world. "You are not the car you drive...you're not the contents of your wallet," says Tyler, showing that he believes the world is so overrun with material items that we forget how to appreciate the simple humanity in all of us. James Twitchell claims in "In Praise of Consumerism" that anti-consumerism is a repackaged form of Marxism. "In macroscopic form, oppression is economic -- the "free market" because "the manipulators," or culture industry, "attempt to enlarge their hegemony by establishing their ideological base in the hearts and pocketbooks of a weak and demoralized populace," therefore making us materialistic. Tyler and Twitchell are in agreement with one another because they realize the detrimental aspects of a consumerist ideology. Rick Wolff, a professor of economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst writes in "Capitalism Promotes Consumerism" that "dominate social groups" reinforced consumption because it was a measure of "personal worth." This is the essence of Tyler's actions to oppose Keynes' theories. Tyler is completely against the idea that what you buy is who you are and believes it attacks our "spiritual values." In his mind, he would think it is ridiculous that I named my car Kaya because the car is worthless in terms of defining who I am, but he is too closed minded in his perspective. Moreover, Wolff continues, "deeply rooted consumerist values...pushed Americans to borrow more to buy more -- to the point of emotional and financial collapse." Both Wolff and Tyler are not in favor of the consumerist culture and are frank when blaming it on capitalism. This portrays Tyler's perspective as not completely insane, though the way he executed his ideas to change the world was. In an ideal world, Tyler would want everyone to be equal in a very

socialist society; therefore, no one would worry about measuring their self worth from their jobs or money. The narrator in the story is a stereotypical office worker who hates his jobs. Fincher depicts his mundane life perfectly to want his id, Tyler, to want to be an anti-capitalist. The narrator's job sparks his unconscious thought against the economic formulas the world is tied to today, and Tyler merely executed his dreams in the most grand method possible.

Socioeconomic positions in the world often play a toll on the human mind as well. Fincher made it clear that the narrator was experiencing insomnia, hence making it hard for him to tell whether he is awake or not. The narrator's job is not spectacular, nor particularly engaging, and he lacks a true social life. From a twenty-year prospective cohort study done by the University of Glasgow, researchers found that socioeconomic and gender positions affect insomnia symptoms and psychiatric distress. The findings from the experiment are connected to the narrator since his economic situation is that of a lowlife citizen, until fight club is created. The narrator's socioeconomic status causes him to have certain symptoms with insomnia, causing him to create an unwanted personality that fulfils his subconscious, anti-consumerist beliefs.

Even though Tyler is of a different mindset than the narrator, Tyler is still the subconscious the narrator has wanted. "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 you are not," said Tyler during the Changeover scene. Yet, the narrator *is* Tyler, and so everything Tyler does the narrator has actually done or pictures Tyler doing it. The narrator has claimed "sometimes Tyler does the talking for me," foreshadowing the Changeover scene. The main reason why Tyler is such a psychological threat to the narrator is because he is smarter than him, in that he knows what the narrator will do even before the narrator knows. But, Fincher constantly throws in lines

when the narrator narrates to his audience that can cause some to raise their eyebrows, making them skeptical on who Tyler really is. When beating Angel Face, one of the members of the club, the narrator does not stop beating the man's face until it is completely destroyed, causing Angel Face to need major surgery. After beating him, the narrator claims, "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 smother all those French beaches I'd never see. I wanted to breathe smoke." Here, we see the narrator's bitter alter-ego without it funneling the words through Tyler's mouth. Since the narrator directly said this to his audience, we can see that he is already an anger-driven, mentally insane being that is keen on eradicating society and "destroy[ing] something beautiful." When saying he wanted to shoot every Panda that wouldn't screw to save its species, he once again hints at his socialist beliefs, since he despises the rich in America that can be self-centered people who are products of capitalism.

Yet, in particular, his final line, "I wanted to breathe smoke," symbolizes the poison that is deteriorating his mindset. Cigarettes play a large role in the film. Both his fabricated, subconscious selves, Tyler and Marla, played by Helena Carter, constantly smoke cigarettes and so they literally, "breathe smoke." Fincher emphasizes this by highlighting the ribbons of smoke that dribble out of their mouths as they exhale. Yet, the narrator is not a smoker, but he claims that he wishes to breathe smoke, showing that he does want to be more like Tyler, his ideal self, on a subconscious level. Also, in America today, we commonly frown upon those who smoke since it has been scientifically proven to cause unhealthiness and death. My friends nor I associate with someone who smokes because we have been educated to know its effects on the body and how peer pressure influences our behavior to commit wrong acts. Smoking is a symbol



for addiction, and the narrator is pulled towards this habit in the future. With Tyler and Marla smoking, and the narrator wanting to smoke, the viewers can envision his mental capacity being consumed by a kind of cloud, for his alter ego's attempt to control and influence him in a series of nefarious activities metaphorically kill his personality.

Tyler is a key indicator for where the narrator lies on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory according to Saul McLeod in "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." Maslow's five hierarchical levels are displayed in the form of a pyramid to demonstrate where we stand in the humanistic perspective. The highest need is known as self-actualization which is fundamentally congruence. It is the psychological term for saying one's self-concept is consistent with his or her idea of him or herself. Since the narrator was unable to reach congruency on his own, his insomniac mind had him envision his ideal self, hence the forceful implementation of Tyler in his mind. The narrator wants to be congruent with his id, unlike most people because the id is usually self-destructive. This explains why Tyler, or really the narrator, blew up his own apartment as an excuse to physically leave the life he once knew and promote anti-capitalism. At the beginning, Tyler was his congruent counter-self that the narrator needed to reach a distorted form of self-actualization. But, as they parted due to Project Mayhem, it was evident that Tyler was not the can-all-be-all actualized self that the narrator had initially wanted, causing the narrator's mind to engage in a civil war, for his multiple personalities quarrel with one another about who can ultimately control his mind.

Even though Tyler Durden is the narrator, most fail to consider the idea that possibly the entire feature is all fabricated. Fincher exquisitely blurs the line between fiction and reality in *Fight Club*. The director constantly employs visual metaphors throughout the film especially

with his character development. Marla is extremely similar to Tyler, simply by the way they act around the narrator. They have similar styles of attire, one that is opposite of the narrator's, both are introduced in the narrator's life unwillingly, and both brawl with the narrator at some point.

When the film began, the narrator despised Marla for she was a "tourist" that should not have been allowed in the public therapy sessions that he was attending. Within ten minutes of runtime after seeing her, he meets Tyler, and has an immediate connection to him after he cannot live anywhere else. However, by the end of the film it is the opposite case: the narrator is possibly in love with Marla, and "kills" Tyler for his own sanity. Fincher consistently toys with the idea of role reversal. Marla and Tyler are the two dominant personalities that attempt to control his mind, and the narrator is constantly switching over to which personality types he favors over the other. His schizophrenia overpowers his actual self to the point where he is mentally torn. This is why the ending of the film is so controversial in terms of who had won the battle in the narrator's mind. The final scene shows the narrator taking Marla's hand and telling her ironically that she met him at a strange time in his life, while city buildings explode. This makes the viewers feel that Marla is the one that is victorious at the end of the feature, until we see a pornographic frame that hints at Tyler's existence despite the narrator's pseudo-suicide. The narrator previously had claimed that Tyler once included pornographic figures in children's movies during his job. Fincher creatively included this ending to coerce his viewers to ponder on who the narrator truly was, given Tyler and Marla's influence. He not only makes the narrator confused in the end, but distorts the audience's perception of the narrator's mind.

Despite the anti-capitalist underlying theme in the film, the feature also deals with the losing of one's masculinity. One of the largest threats the characters give to each other is "getting

their balls.” Even though that is a threat in itself, it also deals with the removal of what they think makes men masculine. In their perspective, anything that makes them less of a man is a complete disgrace. Tyler once claimed, “We’re a generation raised by women. I’m wondering if another woman is what we really need.” *Fight Club* is so desired because it resurfaces the natural, barbaric state that made primitive men masculine, an idea evolutionary psychologists would agree on. The kind of exultation and bliss they experience when fighting not only deals with the release of their anger, but also establishes a connection to their pre-civilized savage selves. According to a research paper from a student at DeAnza college called “Explaining Masculinity Through Evolutionary Psychology,” male aggression in primates often wins the reproductive favor of females because it wards off predators and is overall evolutionarily advantageous, showing why these men embrace their aggression. On the other hand, Susan Douglas in her article “Masculinity is Dangerous,” claimed that “our male children confront deeply conflicting messages about their identities,” and connected that the ideal masculinity is “a guy that can hit hard.” Douglas shows the problems with male stereotypes in this day and age and how they are diminishing, and Fincher does the same by subtly showing the losing of masculinity throughout the film, for example when the narrator escapes the police station with no pants. Sexuality plays a large role in the film in order to depict the broken rung in society’s ladder that limits women from gaining more respect.

David Fincher’s *Fight Club* creates a gateway into a known unknown world. By making the protagonist experience certain consequences when he is swindled by his own self, Fincher exposes a common trait that all humans share regarding the effects of when we allow our alter-ego to dominate. Much like Tyler said in the film, we want to see ourselves how we want to

be; we all want to be congruent. But, only 1 percent of the population is, and I believe that congruency is impossible to reach because one can always improve themselves. Fincher merely took this idea and smacked it in the viewer's face by making the ideal self an entirely other person physically. If Tyler was the only fabrication in the narrator's mind, then one could argue that Fincher's message is that no one can reach self-actualization, for people, even themselves, will turn on each other. Yet, Fincher is explaining how we have subconscious thoughts that lie deep within us that grow and warp our mindsets. The narrator was realistically an anti-capitalist, but he could not show that, only Tyler could through unnecessary and extreme measures, showing that the consumerist culture divides the self. The film is more of a warning sign that we should be aware of all of our desires and handle them with caution. Being our freest self is not necessarily something we should all embrace, since it can lead to a fractured society. Project Mayhem disrupted the power imbalance by raising the unconscious to power. Unlike most dystopian stories, Fincher emphasizes why we need order in our culture, for it is human nature for our unconscious to push its way into the physical world. Tyler Durden is the rebellious self we all contain in our mindsets. This film merely teaches us to be aware of our own Tyler Durden.

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