

# Fight Club, or the Cultural Contradictions of Late Capitalism

*Omar Lizardo*

Most critical engagement with the film *Fight Club* tends to emphasize its relevance for the study of contemporary representations of gender and masculinity. These readings tend to primarily highlight the "reactionary" aspects of the film, which are seen as response to structural sources of feminization experienced by men as they are embedded in the consumerist machine of the service-oriented economy. In this paper I argue that these takes on *Fight Club*, while enlightening and indeed capturing a key aspect, miss what I think is its most essential contribution: its attempt to craft a transcendental "counter-myth" capable with dealing with the cultural and societal contradictions of post-industrial capitalism in the context of the transition to a service oriented economy. I draw on the work of Daniel Bell in order to offer a neo-Weberian reading of *Fight Club* which makes sense of various aspects of the film which are rendered meaningless by the gender-focused reading. I argue that *Fight Club* can be seen as an attempt to deal with the evacuation and exhaustion of the original form of value-rationality from the realm of production in service work – grounded in the older ethic of ascetic Protestantism – as well as the failure of ideological interpellation in the consumer society – grounded in a domesticated version of the experience-based counter-Bourgeois ethic associated with aesthetic modernism – to provide an adequate substitute for it. I conclude that *Fight Club* can therefore be interpreted as an inchoate attempt to produce some version of a class consciousness and cognitive mapping in the late-capitalist situation.

## Introduction: The Masks of Gender

David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) has received a fair amount of critical attention by analysts of popular culture, who have noticed the film's (and Chuck Palahniuk's novel's) obvious relevance to issues of gender and masculinity (see for instance, Tuss 2004; Clark 2002; Lee 2002; Tripp 2005; Gallagher 2004; Friday 2003). The majority of these interpretations of the film have examined *Fight Club* as an ode to the crisis of traditional conceptions of manhood in the post-industrial society, or as a crypto-reactionary response against the disempowerment of men in the

5 late capitalist situation. This line of analysis zeroes in on the “structural feminization” of the traditional (working class) masculine figure as men become part of the contemporary service society and its attendant consumerist machine. From this point of view the film’s unabashed glorification of violence and concomitant exaltation of virile resistance to pain and punishment as an ultimate value are seen as a desperate attempt to re-conquer a space and recuperate an activity that is purely masculine, that is, as masculinity is traditionally conceived and premised on the radical exclusion of women. The film is in this manner interpreted as a portrayal of an essentialist gender-coded rebellion against the effeminizing and emasculating influences of the culture industry and attendant advertising complex, and the white-collar pencil-pushing rut of modern bureaucratic labor.

10 This reading is bolstered by the fact that images of literally feminized men abound in the film. The primary example in this regard is anchored by the tragic-comic portrayal of the character Robert “Bob” Paulson who, endowed with “bitch tits” and literally deprived of his testicles (he suffers from testicular cancer and has enlarged breasts due to chemotherapy) goes during the course of the film from over-sensitive cry-baby to hard-nosed soldier/martyr. His death towards the end of the film can be interpreted as a displaced symbolic effacement of what Paulson represents: the sensitive “new man” that was made so much of in the mid 1990s; one deprived of “his substance” and who is consequently nothing but a soft, effeminized and castrated version of the traditional working class “breadwinner” archetype inherited from the 1950s. In this sense, Paulson’s character is nothing but a parody of the “touchy-feely” version of the new masculinity, endowed with ability to cry and express his feelings, and even to serve as an odd quasi-maternal presence in Jack’s (the focal character and voice-over narrator throughout the film) life, as in the support group scene in which we see Paulson embrace Jack while he seems to almost fall asleep nestled in his bosom.

20 While this attention to the gendered context and content of the film does in fact capture a large portion of the relevance that *Fight Club* has for the contemporary situation, a closer reading suggests that this exclusive attention to the gendered and (homo)sexual dynamics present in the film may obscure as much as they reveal. In particular such a reading shrouds the extent to which other social forces that cross-cut gender – especially those related to class position and work in the postmodern service society – serve as the primary referent and organizing coordinates of the film’s symbolic world. Further, this reading does not let us appreciate the extent to which the film is attempting to craft a “socio-cosmological” myth for the late-modern age that attempts to assuage the socio-structural discords produced by the contemporary organization of labor. In order to explore these issues, in this paper I will attempt to explore how *Fight Club* can be reinterpreted as a poignant allegory of the cultural and social contradictions brought about by *the capitalist socio-economic system* in late modernity. The major goal of this paper is thus to fill the void produced by the current lack of any “totalizing” reading of *Fight Club*, one that puts it in the context of the antinomies produced at the level of the system and by the



cultural and structural disjunctions characteristic of late capitalism.<sup>1</sup> In order to do that I draw on the much neglected work of Daniel Bell, especially his classic *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Bell 1996, hereafter *Contradictions*), to situate *Fight Club* as an allegory of the contemporary crisis of subjectivity in postmodernity.

5

I hope that by the end of the essay the reader will be convinced that *Contradictions* may indeed hold the key to a proper understanding of both the ultimate meaning and impact of the film (i.e. the reasons why it has touched such a nerve and become an instant "cult classic"). In this respect, I will offer the even stronger suggestion that *Fight Club* not only can be read with reference to Daniel Bell's book, but that in fact that almost the *entire* movie can be seen as an excursus on *Contradictions* (in the post-Marxist "Weberian" reading offered therein of the intertwining of culture and social structure in modernity). I will attempt to demonstrate that various otherwise unexplainable aspects of the film as a whole, especially those that have been glossed over in previous gender-based commentary, cannot be understood without reference to *Contradictions*. With this I aim to demonstrate that *Contradictions* is not only not an antiquated reactionary work, but that the issues raised therein persist as probably the key problematic of the contemporary situation.

10

15

I will begin by tracing Bell's analysis from his updating of Weber's connection between the "spirit" of capitalism in Calvinist asceticism to his analysis of the fate of classical bourgeois culture with the move to a consumer society in the first half of the twentieth century. I will show how the contradictions outlined by Bell as resulting from this shift – and possible solutions to the contradictions – form the core of *Fight Club* as an allegory for the modern age.

20

25

### From the Protestant Ethic to the Psychedelic Bazaar

One of the key insights to be gleaned from *Contradictions* concerns Bell's analysis of the fate of the old ethic of discipline and restraint identified by Weber (1958, 1993) as the cultural basis which (in his imagery of possible "elective affinities" between economy and culture) in association with certain innovations in technology, political institutions and the organization of production was responsible for the meteoric rise of capitalism in Northern Europe and England (Weber 1958). Weber's basic argument is that the institutionalization of a secular version of the rational ethic which governed everyday practices sponsored by the Protestant break with medieval Catholicism (especially in its most radical Calvinist form) was responsible for the creation of a set of cultural, ontological and moral precepts which served as the basis for the development of the classical Bourgeois

30

35

40

1. This is not to imply that a totalizing reading – one that captures the 'essential' or the meaning of the film in its entirety – is in fact possible. In fact the attempt to capture or imagine the system in its totality, as Fredric Jameson has pointed out, is, especially in the context of multinational capitalism, bound to be a *failure*. However, this does not imply that the very failure of this operation cannot itself be productive. For more elaboration on this point, see Jameson (1993, pp. 1-72).

45

5 ideology that was consolidated in Anglo-Saxon societies (in particular England and the United States) in the eighteenth century. This included an inveterate distrust of traditional institutions (the “radical” universalizing ethic and antinomian posture of Protestant Christianity which dates back to Paul’s own sweeping rupture from Jewish traditionalism), the desacralization of nature and the expulsion of divinity from the physical world (Zizek 2001). This led to the Protestant obsession with eliminating every trace of the old “pagan” remnants of medieval Roman Catholic culture and worship, and the constant policing of women’s bodies and sexuality that were the basis of many Pagan fertility cults. This leaves open “dead” nature to modification, usage, extraction and human manipulation by way of technology (Marcuse 1974).<sup>2</sup>

10 This dynamic process of the “rationalization” of the social and natural cosmos manifested itself in private life with the imposition of an internalized ethic of control, calculation and planning at the level of the character structure (Adorno & Horkheimer 1972; Lukács 1972; Marcuse 1974). Add to this the Protestant rejection of the traditional aristocratic forms of material distinction and ostentation and an encouragement of the “virtues” of thrift, discipline and hard work, to produce the perfect social type to occupy the role of capitalist (with its taste for “ceaseless accumulation”, itself a remnant of the old Calvinist prohibition against taking any measure of success as a sign of divine providence, lest human hubris is mistaken for God’s actual, but ultimately impenetrable, will).<sup>3</sup>

15 For Weber, the key intellectual break does not occur with the Lutheran revolt against medieval Catholicism (which remains steeped in a subjectivist mysticism), but has to wait until John Calvin’s theoretical rationalization of Lutheran theology. In Calvin’s view, the key consequence of a true acceptance of the absolute omnipotence, omniscience and transcendence of God, is the idea of *predestination*. Because the temporal and spatial limitations of embodied beings do not affect God, any attempt to even think that salvation may be “up in the air” is a blasphemous denial of God’s supreme power and timelessness. Thus the previous Catholic Church-sponsored game of trying to gain God’s favor through work and prayer is a meaningless and sacrilegious denial of God’s absolute prerogative to have decreed the fate of each worldly creature since the beginning of time. Thus no more time should be lost attempting to garner God’s favor or to “guess” one’s status as saved or damned.

20 However, the Calvinist subject was primarily constituted by “his calling”: a Lutheran invention primarily aimed to delegitimize the “other-worldly”

2. On this theme see the famous Weberian reinterpretation of the British ‘scientific revolution’ in Merton (1938). An allegorical representation of technology – represented by iron crafted weapons – as a tool to ‘kill the gods’ (Weber’s *entzauberung* or ‘demagicalization’) and thus render the natural ‘environment’ rationalized in the Weberian sense is given allegorical expression in Hayao Miyazaki’s *Princess Mononoke* (1999).

3. This valuation of the ‘work ethic’ is still a powerful determinant of political opinion and actual policy in the United States and Britain, as exemplified by the enthusiastic dismantling of the welfare state by a coalition of big business and middle class social conservatives, who see the ‘welfare queen’ as the ultimate agency responsible for all newly defined social problems such as crime, drugs, sexual disease and teen pregnancy.

asceticism of the Catholic monks and priests and legitimize the "this-worldly" asceticism of the layman engaged in mundane work, thus destroying the special status of the "celibate" classes of the medieval Catholic order (Weber 1958). It was in this Althusserian hail by an external, transcendental, God supposed to be able to penetrate the deepest kernel of one's being that the never ending subjection (in the sense constitutive of the bourgeois individual) to an ethic of discipline and "rationalization" of everyday existence was accomplished (Althusser 1971).

For Daniel Bell, while Weber's argument was essentially correct when it came to a diagnosis of the origins of the "spirit" of modernity (Berman 1982), the techno-economic changes in the organizational core of capitalism, in particular the move from a competitive, to a monopoly to now a multinational stage, have resulted in structural modifications in the workings of the system that are incompatible and which undermine the basis of the "classic" Bourgeois culture of capitalism. These changes are best represented by the rise of the *credit system* (initially represented by the early twentieth century move to "installment payments" in American capitalism), which facilitates unhindered consumption and leads to a partial dissolution of the old ethic of restraint and delay of gratification (Bell 1996, pp. 66-70). For Weber, it was this combination of "unbridled" acquisitiveness and restraints on consumption which were the key components of the capitalist spirit:

When the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save. The restraints which were imposed upon the consumption of wealth naturally served to increase it by making possible the productive investment of capital (Weber 1958, p. 172).

### Why Jack is not a Pervert: Late Capitalism and Psychosis

One way to summarize this shift at the level of subjectivity that Bell's updating of the Weber thesis is trying to isolate is to mark the old couple modern/postmodern, or capitalist/late-capitalist, as strictly correlative to the dyad of hysteria/psychosis. While many commentators (drawing on Marcuse's [1974] classic *Eros and Civilization* with its wonderfully oxymoronic conception of "repressive desublimation"), see the move toward modern consumerist capitalism as a descent into *perversion*, or a return to paganism and a dismantling of the Protestant break with the hedonism of antiquity (this has for example been a recurrent theme in Zizek's [2001, 2003] later work and a motivation for his return to the ethics of Christianity as codified by St Paul and Chesterton), I contend that this is simply not an accurate characterization; for as Bell notes in *Contradictions*, the Protestant ethic is far from dead but continues to haunt us (like the "dead ghosts" that Weber referred to in the famous Chapter 5 of his classic work). Thus, instead of speaking of a simple replacement of bourgeois asceticism with consumerist perversion, it is more accurate to speak of an advent of a *split subject* caught

*between* hysteria and perversion. This split subject therefore is more accurately characterized as *psychotic*.

The reason for this is that the old ascetic Protestant ethic is not alone anymore: it has been joined by a “counter-ethic” to consume and for “self-realization”. Bell notes that this counter-ethic, while starting in the “cult of the self” and the glorification of transgression of eighteenth century Romanticism, became incorporated into the capitalist system with the emergence of an autonomous artistic field at the end of the nineteenth century which begat the formalist problematic of modernism – with its attempts to efface the distance between subject and object through technical experimentation – and the incorporation of the aesthetic techniques pioneered therein into advertising in the first half of the twentieth century (Campbell 1989). However, it was the crucial “popularization” of the artist’s contrarian stance toward Victorian and bourgeois values – developed by way of modernism’s rejection of all boundaries to experimentation and exploration (Berman 1982) – first in the “roaring 20s” with the incorporation of artistic modernism, philosophical vitalism and pop (“pro-sex”) Freudianism as the primary weapon in the generational struggle of upper middle class youth (Zaretsky 2004), and later when even further popularized versions of these cultural streams became part of the “counterculture” adopted in the 1960s by young middle class baby boomers, that produced the key rift in the culture of modern Western capitalist societies.

This institutionalization (and subsequent taming) of resistance and “subversion” coupled with the neo-Romantic obsession with “the care of the self” (in an admittedly over-simplistic late-Foucauldian sense) constitute the second great elective affinity (in Weber’s sense a case of “fit” between culture and the social structure) of modern capitalism (Zaretsky 2004; Zizek 2001): if the first joined repressive asceticism and labor, the second joins the “expressive asceticism” of the constant drive to self-realization and self-transcendence (Campbell 1989) to the culture industry and the mass consumption of commodities (Illouz 1997).

AQ2

This latter insight constituted the core contribution of the Freudianized “Weberian Marxism” of the Frankfurt school. Their basic mistake was precisely to downplay the contradiction between *asceticism* (Marcuse’s “performance principle” and Adorno and Horkheimer’s “instrumental rationality”) and *expression* (commodity consumption), and to concentrate on the seductive power of the latter. As we have seen, this was done by Marcuse at a theoretical level by merging both repression (asceticism) and expression (hedonism) together in the idea of “repressive desublimation”. However, this conceptual move is not only suspiciously convenient (resolving in one fell swoop a host of thorny ideological issues), but also constitutes a refusal to concede that asceticism and expression cannot be easily merged – whether in theory or in practice – and that this radical incompatibility results in a conflict that is bound to take – as we will see below – “cosmological” and “existential” colorings. Thus we can indeed imagine – with all due respect to Marcuse – something *worse* that repressive



desublimation: the “bulimic” (Bordo 1993) *oscillation between repression and expression*.<sup>4</sup>

Consumption and Production

5

The crucial point to keep in mind here is that consumption is not to be seen as the “opposite” of discipline in any meaningful sense (and Bell in his condemnation of the “hedonistic” counter-culture of the 1960s sometimes fell into this trap), but – as rightly noted by Marcuse – as *an alternative form of discipline*, this time directed at a realm distinct from work and practical activity in the world. Zizek’s interpretation of the Lacanian dictum regarding the superego injunction to “enjoy!” is thus correct in this regard. In the post-industrial society, based on ever-increasing amounts of social domination – by way of the universalization and continual expansion of the Weberian logic of rationalized bureaucratic authority into ever-widening spheres of life – there can be no “expressive desublimation” (as dreamed by early “pro-sex” Freudians like Wilhelm Reich), but any kind of “desublimation” (technically the transfer of libidinal energy away from “higher” pursuits back into “baser” bodily pleasures) must be *constitutively repressive*. This is Lacan’s (Frankfurt school-inspired) insight when stating that the absence of the “law-of-father” in modern society is in fact an even *greater* prison than its presence: when *everything* is permitted then enjoyment is truly evacuated from the social field, insofar as this latter requires the minimal presence of a formal prohibition in order to sustain its (performative) essence (Zizek 1989).

10

15

20

AQ3

*Pace* Zizek however, the modern subject is in this way caught between *two* and not a single superego injunction (both *enjoy!* and *renounce!*), and it is this pull in incompatible directions that creates the correlative sense of paralysis and numbness. It is also the reason why the pervert is no longer a useful symbol of late-capitalist consumerism. That would be the case if the “hysterical ethic” which attempts to ascertain the subject’s identity in a Lutheran “calling” toward work was completely dead; we can see such a situation only in the case of Hollywood stars whose work does not seem like work and who are thus seen as pure consumers (i.e. “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous”). This in fact may account for the collective fascination with their persons, such as the collective frenzy surrounding such figures as Paris Hilton.<sup>5</sup>

25

30

35

4. If unbridled consumption is represented by *overeating*, and Puritan self-control by *anorexia*, then the modern system cannot be characterized by the dominance of either the former nor the latter logic, but by *bulimia*, which is the simultaneous (and cyclic oscillation between) presence of both overeating and anorexia (Bordo 1993).

40

5. Another structural position that movie stars and other individuals who do not appear to have to work and delay gratification in order to get material rewards, is that of *the subject supposed to enjoy* (Zizek 2001). How else to explain the collective fascination with the various ‘sex videos’ featuring Pam Anderson, Paris Hilton and other ‘famous’ women? However this logic is further evidence – in addition to our continuing collective faith in the existence of enjoyment – that most of us are still caught in the *contradiction* between the older values of hard-work and sacrifice and the watered down neo-Romantic ethic to ‘fulfill’ our lives and express our ‘true’ selves by way of consumption.

45

In *Fight Club* we get the hint that it is *psychosis* and not perversion that can best be seen as representative of the postmodern condition. Thus Jack is “split” into two incompatible personalities. However, before the split comes to change his life, what we see is a numb zombie, one who can barely sleep and for whom everything is already “a copy, of a copy of a copy”. This obvious reference to *Simulacra and Simulation* (Baudrillard 1995) is made as he is in fact in the act of copying documents at work, behind a set of cubicles which are all copies of others, while other personnel perform the same duties holding copies of the same Starbucks coffee; when he throws the empty paper cup in the trash, we can also see some remnants of a lunch purchased in some fast food restaurant. What do Starbucks and fast food have in common? They are both products of what George Ritzer has come to call “McDonaldized” service industries. And what is McDonaldization but the *latest* – and most pervasive – manifestation of the Marcusean performance principle responsible for the initial rise of the bureaucratic model of organization whose cultural underpinnings Weber thought originated with the Protestant reformation (Ritzer 2004)?

Thus we can begin to see that one of the crucial problematics of *Fight Club* is precisely the conjunction of, and “contradictions” brought about by, the clash of the incompatible logics of work and consumption, first detailed by Bell in *Contradictions*:

What this abandonment of Puritanism and the Protestant ethic does, of course, is to leave capitalism with no moral transcendental ethic. It also emphasizes not only the disjunction between the norms of the culture and the norms of the social structure, but also an extraordinary contradiction within the social structure itself. On the one hand, the business corporation wants an individual to work hard, pursue a career, accept delayed gratification – to be, in the crude sense, an organization man. And yet, in its products and its advertisements, the corporation promotes pleasure, instant joy, relaxing and letting go. One is to be “straight” by day and a “swinger” by night (Bell 1996, p. 72).

Work still requires ascetic discipline and rationalized renunciation, but this is increasingly difficult to sustain as workers can no longer feel attached to labor by way of a Lutheran “calling”. Here the subject disintegrates because the hail is no longer heard: in the post-industrial society, as the workplace becomes emptied of meaning and purpose (due to the implementation of “Taylorized” and “McDonaldized” models of scientific management in the service society [Braverman 1998]), there can no longer be a “subject-effect” produced by the individual’s “slot” in the social structure in the context of service-production (Althusser 1971). In a similar way, while consumption requires hedonistic abandon (although not without lacking its own form of discipline, or a “Romantic Ethic” in the words of Colin Campbell) insofar as this consumption is tethered to the mass produced system of commodities (where everything is a “copy of a copy”), the desire behind the consumption act is bound to remain permanently unfulfilled (and equally unable to constitute the subject).



We can see a hint of that when Jack seems to be “going through the motions” of ordering from Ikea catalogs late at night. The key observation here is that Jack seems not to garner any *enjoyment* from the consumption act; it is as if some other unseen force is pulling the strings, and he is just following along. Thus in contrast to the commonplace neo-Marxist observation that in the post-industrial society subjectivity becomes the hand-maiden of consumption, I suggest that the contemporary dynamic is precisely one based on the failure of the consumerist society to produce the “subject-effect”. This breakdown, however, instead of producing restlessness and discontent, in fact produce paralysis and numbness.

5

Why? The reason for this as noted above, is because the contemporary subject of service-capital has *two* masters and these masters (equally unable to completely fulfill their constitutive function) continue to drive our actions. The only way out is thus psychotic splitting and depersonalization, where we remove ourselves from the action and watch as these two heterogeneous forces “battle it out” for our attention and exclusive allegiance. Thus caught between the drive to suppress and the drive to express, the drive to refuse and the drive to accept, the drive to work and the drive to consume, we prefer to stand back and assume the passive role of onlooker (hence the dominance of “inter-passivity” as a subject-position that Žižek [2001, 2003, 2006] has recently noticed) and rest content on the “ironic detachment” of the postmodern carnival. In this way the *social psychosis* of a socio-structural order dominated by contradictory principles comes to be reflected in Jack’s own split subjectivity. Can we find other examples of this social double-speak?

10

15

20

Susan Bordo, for instance notices the – on the surface puzzling – *simultaneous* confluence of an “epidemic” of obesity and anorexia in the United States. But she perspicaciously notes that:

25

Far from paradoxical, the coexistence of anorexia and obesity reveals the instability of the contemporary personality construction, the difficulty of finding homeostasis between the producer and the consumer sides of the self. Bulimia embodies the unstable double bind of consumer capitalism, while anorexia and obesity embody the attempted resolution of that double bind. Anorexia could thus be seen as an extreme development of the capacity for self-denial and repression of desire (the work ethic of absolute control); obesity as an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire (consumerism in control). Both are rooted in the same consumer-culture construction of desire as overwhelming and overtaking the self. Given that construction, we can only respond either with total submission or rigid defense (Bordo, 1993, p. 201).

30

35

Eva Illouz, in her study of the discourse surrounding the modern construction of love and romance notes a similar dynamic:

40

the cultural model of love as an intense force coexists with the opposing model of love as work. In the latter, effort replaces the magic spark, commitment the overwhelming force of passion, relatively the absoluteness of love, and conscious monitoring the spontaneous outburst. “Work” has thus become one of the most widely used metaphors for relationship (Illouz 1997, p. 193).

45

5 In her analysis of the discursive tropes and turns of phrase of magazine articles which focus on relationship advice, Illouz finds that the dominant similes indeed revolve around talk of work, rationality, business-like mentalities and practices, etc., confirming Marcuse's prediction in *Eros and Civilization* of a continuing expansion of the Weberian logic of rationalization – which he codified as the “performance principle” – into the private realm of personal relationships.<sup>6</sup> For Illouz,

10 the romantic ethic promoted by these magazines is analogous to the [Protestant] ethic instrumental in the formation of the capitalist entrepreneur. Like the Protestant ethic, this ethic promotes an instrumental, rather than affective or value-laden, rationality by viewing the romantic relationship as a goal attained through the systematic implementation of controlled and planned procedures (Illouz 1997, pp. 195-196).

15 Ironically for Illouz, this very same “Romantic ethic” that rationalizes love according to the logic of social domination of the economic realm, *coexists* with a counter-ethic which views “the metaphorical field of love as intense force” (p. 193), which has an elective affinity with construction of a field of consumer culture – and thus a social injunction to consume – built around love, romance and the romantic experience (i.e. “romantic” vacations, dinners, flowers, chocolate, etc.). The fact that the same structural split, revolving around the contradiction between work and consumption, initially pointed to by Bell, has been noted by cultural analysts working independently on such disparate subjects as eating disorders, conceptions of the body and romance, is evidence that it may constitute one of the central axes of subjective and social strain in the postmodern service society. It is my contention that this contradiction also affords us the best framework with which to read Fincher's *Fight Club*: as a representation of various solutions and attempts to efface this deadlock.

### Touchy Feely Men?

35 From a superficial perspective, the early scenes in the film in which we are offered a parody of the standard psycho-babble which dominates twelve-step programs seem incongruous. What does that have to do with the other “messages” of the film, most of which revolve around the issues of work and the consumer society? This seems to provide evidence that the film is in two minds, and that these scenes are simply excuses for portraying effeminate, castrated men, who are forced to degrade themselves into expressing their feelings. Thus the gender axis, in apparent disconnection to other socio-structural forces, appears once again to be the key to *Fight Club*.

45 6. Before Marcuse, Georg Simmel (1949) – in an elaboration of the Marxist idea of the fetishism of commodities – warned of a similar dynamic in respect to the use of the money medium.



However, such a reading seems unsatisfying. After all, Jack begins to frequent these groups as a way to deal with his “insomnia”. Not only that, but attending these group sessions becomes an *obsession* for Jack. This obsessive and addictive character of the self-help experience seems to belie their status as a superfluous comedic interlude. In fact, I submit that the scenes at the “support groups” are in fact a key part of the film, and are not disconnected from the film’s larger critique of the consumer society (which makes the gender angle an important but ultimately secondary resource for interpretation). One way to begin to gain some purchase on the issue is to ask: if Jack becomes *addicted* to these groups, then does that have any connection to his *other* addiction? We know what this other addiction is: shopping. As shown in the opening scenes of the film, Jack is smack in the middle of the attempt to remake his self-identity by way of consumer goods (which results in his later being re-baptized by Tyler as “Ikea boy”). What do consumption and support groups have to do with each other? The answer is: a lot! As Bell notes:

5  
10  
15

What happened in the United States was that traditional morality was replaced with psychology, guilt by anxiety. A hedonistic age has its appropriate psychotherapies as well. If psychoanalysis emerged just before World War I to deal with the repressions of Puritanism, the hedonistic age has its counterpart in sensitivity training, encounter groups, “joy therapy”, and similar techniques that have two characteristics essentially derived from a hedonistic mood: they are conducted almost exclusively in groups; and they try to “unblock” the individual by physical contact, by groping touching, fondling, manipulating. Where the earlier intention of psychoanalysis was to enable the patient to achieve self-insight and thereby redirect his life – an aim inseparable from a moral context – the newer therapies are entirely instrumental and psychologistic; their aim is to “free” the person from inhibitions and restraints so that he or she can more easily express his impulses and feelings.

20  
25

AQ4

Bell (see also Zaretsky 2004) sees this neo-Romantic approach to self-knowledge and “therapy” as directly congruent with, and in fact an off-shoot of, the same “counter-ethic” which devolved from the artist attempt to aestheticize her own quest for self-knowledge and her conception of the self as an “unfinished project” that had to be fulfilled by way of involvement in “limit” sensual experiences and the exploration of hedonic excess.

30

Colin Campbell has put forth a virtually identical thesis, while criticizing Daniel Bell for not looking beyond the nineteenth century for the origins of this “Romantic ethic”. For Campbell the cult “sensibility”, inwardness and “imaginative” hedonism, have been an integral part of the individualist rift brought about by the Protestant reformation since the beginning. While the sober, “unemotional” Puritan ethic of restrained and disciplined labor in the world was carried by Calvinism, Campbell argued that a much more individualist/Romantic ethic in which the person was allowed to have a spiritual and emotional relationship with transcendental spiritual forces was kept alive by Lutheranism and the various offshoots of Calvinism that broke with the predestination thesis (Pietism, Methodism, etc.).

35  
40  
45

Thus not only is there a direct line of connection between the modern ethic of self-discovery through consumption and a "Romantic ethic" of individual feeling that developed as a response to Calvinism (as this ethic was transformed and secularized by the Cambridge Platonists and the Romantic philosophers, and even later by the modernist artists), but this very same ethic can be seen as having produced the modern conception of therapy as a journey of self-discovery and of support groups as sites for the expression of the uniqueness of the self by way of emotional displays that reveal our "true" self. Thus we can begin to see the reason why Jack, the ultimate consumer, comes to be addicted to support groups: in their unabashed fomentation of hedonistic self-interest, these support groups function as another social site where the consumerist self can be nurtured and sustained. It is no wonder that Jack *breaks* with his addiction to these groups precisely as he begins to fight (himself) and stops shopping.

### Why Fight?

Most commentators of *Fight Club* are of course forced to confront head-on the "meaning" of fighting in the symbolic space of the film. Most of those that focus on gender representations in the movie point to the role of fighting as the ultimate "macho" act and as further proof that the primary concern of the film is with the crisis of a particular version of American masculinity at the dawn of the millennium. From this perspective, the main point concerns the connection between the feminization of men through a newfound enmeshment in consumer culture that is constantly alluded to in the film, such as when Durden complains in exasperation that real men should not need to know what a *bidet* is, or when he exclaims, pointing to a *Calvin Klein* underwear ad, that "that is not what a real man should look like" (this is of course one of the most ironic moments in the film, insofar as "that" – slender and muscular – is exactly how Durden – played by Brad Pitt – is imagined by Jack).

However what is missed by this reading of the film, is precisely the socio-structural and class-based origins of this feminization of men. As is plain throughout the film, the feminization of men begins not at the point at which they are forced to become consumers, but in their everyday existence as *laborers* in the service society. Thus, it is the new service jobs that "this new generation" of men – who do not have a great war to commemorate, but whose war is instead a "spiritual war" – is forced to work that begin the process of feminization. Becoming entangled in consumer culture is simply the complement of the more fundamental "feminization" that has occurred at the *point of production* with the move toward the post-industrial organization of the economy.

Furthermore, even this reference to a spiritual war is a give-away that the primary themes of *Fight Club* are not organized around class resistance and "anti-consumerism" in the traditional Marxist sense, but revolve around the Weberian ideas concerning the transcendental (inherited from religion) and cultural basis of economic action (or the "spirit" of capitalism). This point will



become clear once we examine the solution offered in *Fight Club*, which is none other than to reconstitute a Puritan, but nihilistic religion, in which the values of self-effacement, discipline and self-control are re-affirmed against the Romantic ethic of self-expression, uniqueness and self-discovery through sensual excess.

5

For instance, when Durden and part of his gang briefly kidnap the police commissioner and threaten to castrate him in an attempt to terrorize him into calling off his investigation of their group, Durden – later of course shown to be Jack – says:

10

Hi. You're going to call off your "rigorous investigation," you're gonna publicly state that there is no underground group. Or – these guys are gonna take your balls. We'll send one to the New York Times and one to the Los Angeles Times. Press release style. Look. *The people you're after are the people you depend on. We cook your meals, we haul your trash, we connect your calls, we drive your ambulances. We guard you while you sleep. Do not fuck with us.*

15

Notice what is obvious – precisely because of its conspicuous absence – in this "laundry list" of occupations: there is no mention of any (traditional industrial) *manual labor*. All of the "social functions" that Durden refers to here, collecting trash, cooking, connecting calls, etc., are a product of the service society, or the "post-industrial" society that Bell talked about in his classic monograph. The admonishment to not "fuck" with this *social class* (what else can the cryptic reference to "us" possibly stand for), is – as we later find out – not just an idle threat, since the post-industrial society is even more dependent on the legions of service and emotional workers than the classic industrial society ever was on the traditional blue-collar worker.<sup>7</sup>

20

When Jack is recounting his own psychotic elaboration of Durden's biography, we find that Durden specializes in various "shit jobs" – such as changing the reel in a movie theater – and we should read the reference to excrement here as pointing to not just any bad job, but to those non-manual jobs that fall under the new McDondalized logic of boring, repetitive labor and scripted interaction with customers (that is why waiters figure as the central occupational group in *Fight Club*). We later find out that it was indeed Jack who worked all of these jobs (including waiting tables at a restaurant), and that his "insomnia" came from the fact that he *worked 24 hours a day* (just like those unheralded soldiers of the service society that answer the phone when we call customer services at 3:00 a.m.). Jack therefore is not really a "character" in any meaningful of the term. *He is the symbol of a collectivity*, a collective that can only be defined in class terms: Jack is the "everyman" of the service society.

25

30

35

40

7. The reason for this has to do with the fact – anticipated by Marx in *Capital* – that the manual worker was always potentially replaceable (and ultimately was replaced) by the 'dead labor' of automated technology. This, of course, is also a possibility in the case of service labor, since *cyborgs* would be capable of performing most of the social and emotional labor that this type of production entails. Alex Proyas's *I Robot* (2004) provides a vision (and liberationist allegory) built around a society of automated service-slaves.

45

5 The big gender irony in this respect is precisely that the service class, in “real” contemporary society, is not dominated by men but by women. However, in the movie we see mostly *men* as the members of these service positions, and as the ones who acquire this rudimentary class consciousness precisely insofar as their identity *as men* is radically incompatible with the *care-taking* functions (cooking, doing laundry, etc.) of these jobs. The obvious explanation in this respect is that these care-taking functions are simply the commodified versions of the labor that women have *always* performed (at no charge) in the private realm of the household. Insofar as this becomes an extension of traditionally coded gendered labor, the trauma for women in the post-industrial society becomes qualitatively different than that of men: while women have to grapple with the cultural and symbolic pressures toward *masculinization* that comes from their exodus from the private sphere of the household to the public sphere of labor, men have to deal with the feminization of the public sphere both in the literal terms implied by the changing dynamics of production and the organization of work in the knowledge society, but also by the accompanying demographic transformation as women come to comprise one half of the active labor force (Bordo 1993, pp. 185-214).

20 Thus we can come to a new interpretation of the role of fighting in the film: fighting (and violence in general) can in this way be seen not only as the last recourse for the establishment of a sacred (homoerotic and sadistic) masculine bond, but also as a *class-based* reaction against the *commodification of sociability* (using the word sociability in Simmel’s [1949] classical sense of interaction for its own sake) in the post-industrial society. The reason for this is that it is precisely in service capitalism that sociability itself goes from being a non-commodified act of interpersonal exchange to a commodified operation, subject to the dictates of instrumental rationality and key resource in mediating economic exchange. Bell described this change as a societal shift from “a game against nature/technology” (in the industrial society) to a “game between persons” (in the post-industrial society). However, this is not a game that any of us decided to play, but one that we are forced to play as part of the performance principle of the service economy.

35 Fighting, in terms of the late Baudrillard, becomes in *Fight Club* a pure form of social connection that is completely wasteful, a pure act of exchange and Batailleian *expenditure* and giving that does not have to respond to the stereotyped and choreographed social motions produced by the commodification of sociability in the post-industrial service society (“do you want fries with that?”). The act of fighting becomes in this sense a symbol – however inchoate and rudimentary – of *class revolt*. Thus, in the same way that at the beginning of the rise to the dominance of monopoly capital during the nineteenth century, traditional guild craftsmen *broke their machines and burned their tools* as an act of protest against the proletarianization of their class stratum, the service workers of the late-twentieth-century capitalist society are depicted in *Fight Club* as *breaking their bodies*, insofar as those bodies, through the grooming to which they are constantly subjected, become the primary tools



of the post-industrial *mode of production*. We can appreciate that Jack begins to revolt against the concern with his *appearance*, precisely because that is what is expected of him *at his job* (thus the oedipal kick of rebelling against his boss is augmented by the fact that, by rebelling against the code of appearance of white collar labor, he is rebelling against an entire system of production). Thus, fighting insofar as it entails a destruction of the body entails the disabling of the body as a tool of commodified sociability (as when a bloodied-mouthed Jack flashes a sinister crimson smile to a coworker during a boring boardroom meeting).

5

In this context, fighting can be seen as a denial and a subversion of the logic of “niceness” and forced sociability that the McDonaldised corporations force their workers to display insofar as they are in the business of *servicing* the customer. Fighting inverts this relationship, and serves as a cathartic release from all of the pent-up frustration that accrues from the countless everyday humiliations and subsequent requirement to engage in socio-emotional self-control on the part of the service worker (Hochschild 1983). This is the side of the contradiction that still requires the ascetic logic of delayed gratification. Fighting insofar as it is a non-commodified release thus represents the film’s version of a form of *expressive* desublimation not subject to the logic of social domination of the contemporary system (in contrast to the consumption of commodities, which is portrayed only as a degraded form of Marcuse’s repressive desublimation).

10

15

20

In Fincher’s rendering, fighting is thus an area of human interaction that has not yet been “colonized” by the logic of profit and commodification of the system (Habermas 1987). This represents a stark refusal to play the “game between persons” of the post-industrial society, and as such represents an image – maybe one of the few possible portrayals in the contemporary juncture – of a group of *men* coming to acquire a measure of *class consciousness*. Not only that, insofar as fighting begins to occupy the very same hours of the day – and sometimes the same spaces such as bars – that were previously devoted to assiduous consumptive activity (going out to dance clubs, alcohol consumption, dining with a date, etc.) – and fighting *only* occurs at night during the film – it begins to *take the place* of consumption. The night, previously filled with the endless quest to find the self through consumption, comes to be dominated by a new quest to deny the parameters of this search by way of retreating from its requirements (i.e. keeping a nice, “well-kept” appearance).

25

30

35

### The Return to Discipline

40

The men of *Fight Club* seem permeated by a sense of betrayal. They certainly feel like “history” has not been kind to them, like they have been fooled and “bamboozled”. But why? One answer to this question revolves precisely around the contradiction between work/asceticism and consumption/expression. Following the profit-drive logic of rationalized capitalism, work in

45



5

the service society is made more and more dehumanizing, being decomposed – following the Taylorist logic of “scientific management” into ever more simple steps (Braverman 1998). Even the emotional and social labor that dominates the service sphere is subject to the strictures of scripted interactions and robotic sales-pitches. This is the ultimate in depersonalization and the ultimate fulfillment of the “instrumental rationality” described in the Weberian Marxism of the Frankfurt school, where everything that is unique and individual falls by the wayside of the leveling logic of the modern performance principle. The workplace becomes a cubicked, “Dilbertized”, silicon cage.

10

At the level of consumer culture, however, a different logic dominates. This is a tamed, second-hand version of the modernist/Romantic ethic of self-expression and self-fulfillment, which winding its way from the eighteenth century irruption of Romanticism in late-eighteenth-century German poetry, reaches its zenith in the social invention of the person of the “artist” in the nascent stages of the nineteenth-century field of artistic production in Europe (Bourdieu 1996). As this set of values became the primary strategy of commodity presentation in advertising throughout the twentieth century – as in DDB’s groundbreaking Volkswagen campaign in the 1960s (Frank 1998) – and as the (post)modernist transcendental ethic of self-fulfillment and self-expression through limit experiences was given new life in the social revolts of the 1960s, a whole generation of individuals was raised with the promises that their lives were special, that they could find *individual* and *unique* fulfillment, a sense of self that was theirs and theirs alone in an increasingly *standardized, depersonalized* field of mass production of commodities. At the same time, the now dominant “tertiary” economic sectors kept producing more and more *social positions* which, in the very way that they were conceived of and organized, violated and contradicted the logic of uniqueness and idiosyncrasy (Jack’s interaction with his boss for instance is a veritable fountain of this rationalized management speech, full of talk about “de-prioritizing current reports” and “action-items”), in favor of the values of predictability, duplicability, redundancy and “disposable expediency” (Ritzer 2004).

15

20

25

30

35

40

These are the “excremental jobs” of the service economy, which are organized following the radically rationalizing logic of McDonaldization: instead of individual uniqueness and fulfillment in work as a special calling – the promise of the traditional Protestant ethic – everyday life at work in the service society only serves as a constant reminder of the radical rift at the cultural basis of modern capitalism. The system is thus torn between the logic of the person as a unique locus of individual agency and the logic of the system of commodity production which robs the worker of her uniqueness by sanitizing and dehumanizing the societal role structure, in the form of McJobs.

45

The consumer society in effect pulls the ultimate sleight of hand by tacking the promise of a unique identity to mass-produced commodity consumption. Bamboozled and betrayed indeed! It is in this sense that the post-industrial individual feels that he has been cheated (or caught in the horns of a socio-structural and cultural dilemma), and it is this sense of betrayal – and inchoate



THE CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS OF LATE CAPITALISM 237

anger – that forms the basis of *Fight Club*. As Durden emphasizes, addressing a captive audience of accountants, waiters and gas attendants, in one of his most inspired speeches:

AQ5

Man, I see in fight club the strongest and smartest men who have ever lived. I see all this potential – God damn it, an entire generation pumping gas and waiting tables; they're slaves with white collars. Advertisements have them chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit they don't need. We are the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War, or great depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives. We've all been raised by television to believe that one day we'll all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars – but we won't. And we're learning slowly that fact. And we're very, very pissed off.

5

10

The "spiritual war" that Durden refers to here is, I submit, nothing but the great cultural contradiction of the post-industrial society, caught between the older spirit of the "calling" for a transcendental purpose of the Protestant ethic – alluded to here by references to older generations who had a purpose, "Great War, or great depression" – and the newer spirit of worldly self-fulfillment through commodity consumption which misleads every one of us into thinking about ourselves as small deities in the Durkhemian sense – "movie gods and rock stars" – stuck in socio-structural positions – "jobs we hate" – which conspire to thwart those very same aspirations.

15

20

Couple this sense of being pulled in different directions with the fact that the end state of those directions (Romantic or Puritan) carries with it no longer the seal of approval given to it in their status as "transcendental ethics", and all that is left is *nihilism*. In *Contradictions*, Bell understood this and, as opposed to the usual "neo-conservative" misreading of his work (where he is interpreted as proposing that the Romantic ethic "kills" the Protestant ethic), he also knew that both of these sources of cultural dynamism were *exhausted*. It is no accident, therefore, that Bell opens the book with a passage from *The Will to Power*, where Nietzsche foretells the advent of nihilism as the main cultural current of contemporary Western civilization.

25

30

Notice that, if the problem lies precisely in the opposition between (and the ultimate expenditure of) older values that emphasized self-refusal, humility, abnegation and hard work (the Weberian Protestant Ethic) and the neo-Romantic chic of self-expression co-opted by the advertising industry (Frank 1998), then the only "solution" to this dilemma is to create a *new ethic* that devalues one side of this polarity and exalts the other, and to *drop out of the social structure* (remaining in it only in the role of *agent provocateurs*) since the lack of fit between McDonaldized social positions and ultimate values related to individuals' self-worth is the other side of the contradiction. This is precisely Durden's solution. In an attempt to cope with the horns of this dilemma, Durden fashions a group of *fundamentalist* urban guerrilla fighters. The key point for our purposes is the specific ideology around which Durden organizes his underground group: a belief system focused on *discipline, sacrifice, the ability to part with material*

35

40

45

*possessions and a radical rejection of the cultural logic of self-expression and uniqueness of consumer capitalism.*

In order to join the group, for instance, the prospective member must be willing to stand outside Jack/Tyler's house for two days without food or water, all the while enduring a barrage of insults and physical abuse upon his person. Once inside, the new member is socially integrated into an alternative primary group (*gemeinschaftlich*) which functions like a well-oiled platoon, not unlike the Calvinist armies of sixteenth-century England and the Netherlands. Durden makes sure that, in his new society, members are re-programmed away from the dominant neo-Romantic and hedonistic ideology that emphasizes their "intrinsic" worth and special status as a person. As a friendly reminder, Durden blares to his working army through a megaphone: "You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everything else. We are all part of the same compost pile".

Where have we heard something like this before? In none other than the radical rationalization of Lutheranism by John Calvin, in which God's transcendental majesty and absolute omniscience and omnipotence dwarfed and rendered despicable the lonely human's mortal flesh. In Calvin's theology, insofar as man is bound by sin and flesh, he is unworthy of claiming *any kind of contact* with God, since this blasphemous situation would imply a melding of the abject impurity of the flesh with the perfect purity of God's transcendental glory. This Calvinist debasement of the human and his dictum of the absolute *externality* of God *vis-à-vis* the world of flesh and things, served as one of the primary rationalizing impulses of Protestantism, rendering the world "disenchanted" (*Entzauberung*) in Weber's terms and thus open for practical activity and manipulation and more likely to be conceived in the abstract, mechanical terms of Newtonian science.

The difference between Durden's and Calvin's denigration of all things human and their attempt to deny the basis of personal hubris or pretensions to unique or special status (most forcefully codified in the Calvinist idea of a predestined state of salvation that we did not have access to) is precisely that Durden's version represents a Nihilistic, post-Nietzschean version of this cosmology, in which all that remains is the decaying human flesh without the possibility of redemption (the last remnant of supernatural transcendence drops out of the picture, and all that is left is a Spinozan nightmare of material decadence). As Durden shouts to Jack: "Fuck damnation, man! Fuck redemption! We are God's unwanted children? So be it!"

Thus *Fight Club's* portrayal of one possible solution to the contradictions of modern capitalism revolves around a rejection of the neo-Romantic ideology of self-expression in favor of a *return* to a purified – and thus *fundamentalist* in the strict sense – version of the original Protestant ethic, with a post-secular, monist and decidedly non-transcendental twist. In this manner, the radical nihilism of extreme nineteenth-century Nietzschean Romanticism is married to a neo-ascetic ideology of self-abnegation and renunciation. This is a way out of the contradiction insofar as it strikes the heart of the consumerist ethic by deflating the ideology of self-expression and self-fulfillment – through the narcissism of



consumption (such as that sustained when Jack wonders about the “kind of dining room set” that defines him as a person).

The return to the ascetic logic of work as a calling is also present here: for the “space monkeys” making soap is now *fulfilling work*, because they are now part of project to change the world into their image (Weber 1993, pp. 166-183). This *activism* is another point in common between the army of space monkeys and the rationalizing armies of Protestants that swept sixteenth-century Europe. Their display of what Weber referred to as “*this-worldly asceticism*” – self-abnegating action to change *this world* to conform to an abstract principle and ideal – precludes the opposite mystical “other worldly asceticism” of renunciation and inwardness – compatible with the hedonistic ethic of the consumer society as noted by Zizek (2001) – characteristic of the neo-pagan new age turn among those Yuppies who yearn for a spiritual experience (such as Tantra of Kabbala).<sup>8</sup> Daniel Bell in *Contradictions* notices the parallel between asceticism and readiness for war:

It is striking that every new, rising social force – be it a new religion, new military force, or new revolutionary movement – begins as an ascetic movement. Asceticism emphasizes non-material values, renunciation of physical pleasures, simplicity and self-denial, and arduous, purposeful discipline. That discipline is necessary for the mobilization of psychic and physical energies for tasks outside of the self, for the conquest and subordination of the self in order to conquer others ... The disciple of the old religious “warriors of God” was channeled into military organization and battle. What was historically unique about the Puritan temper was the devotion of this-worldly asceticism to an occupational calling and to work and accumulating. Yet the end of the Puritan’s being was not primarily wealth. As Weber remarked, the Puritan got nothing out of his wealth for himself but the proof of his own salvation. And it was this furious energy that built an industrial civilization. For the Puritan, “the most urgent task” was to destroy spontaneous, impulsive behavior and bring order into the conduct of life (Bell 1996, p. 82).

Thus it is misleading to interpret this return toward discipline as a “micro-fascist” solution to the deadlock (i.e. Diken & Laustsen 2002). Fascism, as Zizek has noted, is built around the social fantasy that capitalism and the traditional corporate community centered around “primordial” sources of social solidarity (race, blood, nation) can be reconciled (Zizek 2001, 2006, p. 20). What is unique about Calvinist asceticism is precisely its rejection of corporate or primordial bonds, and its naked acceptance of the *lone individual* as the basic moral and ontological unit of the cosmos (it is in this sense that Protestant asceticism prepares the ground for the individual as the primary *political* entity as exemplified in Anglo-Saxon democracy). In this sense there is a critical difference between fascism and fundamentalism: while the fascist delegates the “activist” labor of transforming the world to some supra-individual corporate agency (the party, the state, the army, etc.) the fundamentalist takes it upon *herself* as a

8. For an argument linking consumerist ideology in late capitalism and Tantric spirituality see Urban (2000).

5

10

15

20

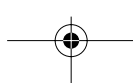
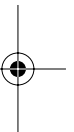
25

30

35

40

45



matter of moral duty to *act* on the world to change it without recourse to corporate agents.

Durden's space monkeys are much closer to this last model than they are to traditional fascist communities. The reason for this, as I have endeavored to show, is that there is a direct line of connection between Protestant asceticism, Lutheran Romanticism and the aporias of the service society. Thus, in the very same way in which it is a mistake to regard the current rise of global Islamic movements as "Islamofacism", treating the space monkeys as a "retreat" from the initially subversive innovation of fighting is a mistake. This is especially important, since while fighting provided an ultimately "therapeutic" relief to the contradictions, the space monkeys provide a much more radical and *structural* (rather than inward and psychotherapeutic) solution.

### It's the End of the World as we Know it and I Feel Fine

Ultimately we realize that Jack/Tyler has been thinking of an even more radical way to expunge the contradiction: instead of just doing "cultural work" (effacing monuments, vandalizing property, etc.), to assuage the dislocation between the ideology of self-expression and the increasingly depersonalizing labor of service. The space monkeys aim at striking at the most crucial socio-structural support of the entire complex: the system of "installment payments" that Daniel Bell isolates as the key institutional transformation at the level of the economy responsible for the rise of consumer capitalism and the subsequent ascent into partial hegemony of the ideology of self-expression recruited by advertisers to sustain it. It is here clear that Jack had read his Bell:

Selling became the most striking activity of contemporary America. Against frugality, selling emphasized prodigality, against asceticism, the lavish display. None of this would have been possible without that revolution in moral habit, the idea of installment selling. Although it had been practiced fully in the United States before World War I, installment selling had two stigmas. First, most installment sales were to the poor, who could not afford expenditures ... Second, installment selling meant debt to the middle class, and going to debt was wrong and dangerous ... Being moral meant being industrious and thrifty. If one wanted something, one should save for it. The trick of installment selling was to avoid the word "debt" and emphasize the word "credit" (Bell 1996, p. 69).

Thus, Durden's diagnosis ends up being in complete accord with the sociological analysis of *Contradictions*: destroy the credit system, and consumer capitalism (along with its contradictions) will also fall. It is therefore no surprise that the ultimate terrorist attack planned by the space monkeys targets the major banks and credit card buildings: liberation from the credit system so that people can no longer make use of the institutionalized means to consume, and the contradiction will thus be dissolved.

The destruction of the two "credit card" buildings in hindsight now possesses an eerie reminiscence to the destruction of the World Trade Center (the buildings

in the film crumble in a strikingly similar way to how the two towers did in real life). But the similarities are in this respect superficial: while "Project Mayhem" can be technically classified as "terrorists", they still possess hope that through their act *this world* (that of the rich post-industrial societies) will be redeemed. The 9/11 hijackers in contrast, had already given up on this (Western, corrupt) world as patently unredeemable, and their attack was meant as an act of symbolic communication aimed at those "back home" in the "other" world of global capitalism, still comparatively untouched by the internal contradictions of this very same system (albeit certainly negatively affected by the actions of the very same multinational corporations and military-industrial complex that sustain our own consumptive hedonism in the global North).

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show that, behind the gendered readings of *Fight Club* lies a more compelling and important story. What if the obvious sado-masochist, homoerotic and generally "perverted" subtext of *Fight Club* is a red-herring? What if *Fight Club*, instead of simply proclaiming and reveling in the deconstruction of masculinity in the service society in fact offers a more *constructive* vision of a radical solution to alleviate its aporias? *Fight Club* in the sense that I have tried to indicate here, thus points to a deeper structural dilemma of which gender is a definitely central, but not the only important, nexus.

In *Fight Club* the very cultural and motivational support of the capitalist system is shown to be cracking, under the very same pressures that allow it to reproduce qua socio-economic structure. The *radicalism* of the solutions that are iterated throughout the movie (i.e. destroy your *body* and the rules of commodified sociability of the service society; destroy the *symbolic* support of the system by developing a counter-ideology of self-effacement; destroy the *structural* support of the system by eliminating the institutional infrastructure of credit) form a triad, in which radical action comes to be guided by an increasingly "totalizing" *cognitive map* (in Jameson's sense) of the system.

The initial turn to fighting is thus analogous to the initially inchoate act of protest of a class under threat. The destruction and effacement of buildings and monuments works more like the still hysterical (based on a politics of recognition) action of many radical movements today, in which the acts of "subversion" are always staged with the gaze of the (paternal) *master* in mind (the WTO, the G8, the White House, etc.). Finally, the increasing ability to *totalize* stemming from an increasing cognitive mastery of the structural underpinnings of the system, leads the group to their most "radical" act: the destruction of the credit system, dealing what would be a crippling blow to consumer society. Many have noticed that portrayals of class and groups reaching class consciousness are seldom part of American popular culture. In this sense, *Fight Club* is unique in allowing us an opportunity to witness what something like that would be in the context of the post-industrial service society.

## References

- Althusser, L. (1971) 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Monthly Review Press, New York, pp. 127-186.
- 5 Baudrillard, J. (1995) *Simulacra and Simulations*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI.
- AQ6 Bell, D. (1974) *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*, Basic Books, New York.
- Bell, D. (1996) *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Harper Collins, New York [first published 1976].
- Berman, M. (1982) *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Penguin Books, New York.
- 10 Bordo, S. (1993) *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996) *The Rules of Art*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.
- Braverman, H. (1998) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, Monthly Review Press, New York [first published 1974].
- 15 Campbell, C. (1989) *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Blackwell, New York.
- Clark, M. J. (2002) 'Faludi, Fight Club, and Phallic Masculinity: Exploring the Emasculating Economics of Patriarchy', *Journal of Men's Studies*, vol. 11, pp. 65-76.
- Diken, B. & Laustsen, C. B. (2002) 'Enjoy Your Fight! "Fight Club" as a Symptom of the Network Society', *Cultural Values*, vol. 6, pp. 349-367.
- 20 Frank, T. (1998) *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.
- Friday, K. (2003) "'Generation of Men Without History": Fight Club, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom', *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 13, no. 3.
- AQ7 Gallagher, M. (2004) 'Tripped Out: The Psychedelic Film and Masculinity', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 21, pp. 161-171.
- 25 Habermas, J. (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action Volume II: Lifeworld and System, A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.
- Hochschild, A. (1983) *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Illouz, E. (1997) *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- 30 Jameson, F. (1993) *The Seeds of Time*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- Lee, T. (2002) 'Virtual Violence in Fight Club: This Is What Transformation of Masculine Ego Feels Like', *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures*, vol. 25, pp. 418-423.
- Lukács, G. (1972) *History and Class Consciousness*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Marcuse, H. (1974) *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.
- 35 Merton, R. K. (1938) 'Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England', *Osiris*, vol. 4, pp. 360-632.
- AQ8 Ritzer, G. (2004) *The McDonaldization of Society*, Pine Forge Press, London.
- Simmel, G. (1949) 'The Sociology of Sociability', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, pp. 254-261.
- 40 Tripp, D. (2005) "'Wake Up!": Narratives of Masculine Epiphany in Millennial Cinema', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 22, pp. 181-188.
- Tuss, A. (2004) 'Masculine Identity and Success: A Critical Analysis of Patricia Highsmith's The Talented Mr. Ripley and Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club', *The Journal of Men's Studies*, vol. 12, pp. 93-102.
- 45 Urban, H. B. (2000) 'The Cult of Ecstasy: Tantrism, the New Age, and the Spiritual Logic of Late Capitalism', *History of Religions*, vol. 39, pp. 268-335.



THE CULTURAL CONTRADICTIONS OF LATE CAPITALISM 243

Weber, M. (1958) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.

Weber, M. (1993) *The Sociology of Religion*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Zaretsky, E. (2004) *Secrets of the Soul: A Social and Cultural History of Psychoanalysis*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

Zizek, S. (2001) *The Fragile Absolute: or why is the Christian Legacy worth Fighting For*, Verso, London.

Zizek, S. (2003) *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Zizek, S. (2006) *The Parallax View*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

5

10

15

20

25

30

35

40

45

