

*Fight Club* (1999)

Directed by David Fincher, written by Jim Uhls

How can you not like a movie where half a dozen corporate skyscrapers are blown up and the explicit message the film delivers is: "Things you own end up owning you"? Easy, when the movie is *Fight Club*. Anti-consumerism may appear progressive, but what do you replace it with? Under David Fincher's direction, *Fight Club* endorses a peculiar kind of sado-masochistic hedonism for the masculine elite, and a cult-like subservience for the masses. The cure is worse than the disease. No wonder some critics have declared the movie fascist.

The movie opens near its eventual climax. The Narrator (Edward Norton – he's not named in the movie so I'll call him N) is in an office overlooking a big city skyline and Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) is shoving a gun in his mouth, apparently ready to detonate both the pistol and the home-made explosives under the towering corporate icons. The movie then backtracks and the story is told mostly through flashback.

N is a modern-day seeker. That means that, in the beginning, he isn't sure what he's seeking. He's a 30-year old businessman who's playing the consumption game self-consciously and looking for meaning in the possession of goods. He reads magazines on the toilet about contemporary furniture. Compulsive consumption substitutes for sex. In his own words, he "had it all", including a "wardrobe that was getting very respectable, close to being complete." Of course, this is a blind alley. Consumption never satisfies; it only multiplies desire. It is not more that we need, he thinks, but less – much less. We're "working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need".

When possessions cease to bring meaning, what's next? N is attracted to a self-help group for men who have lost their balls, literally, through radical cancer surgery. It's the physical version of social emasculation that has turned men such as N into pansies and puppets of mass consumption. Soon, he's addicted to self-help groups because: "Only crying makes it real!" Because he's on the track of seeking reality in feelings rather than things, he hasn't escaped the feminine. He needs new balls, not empathy. In the process, he meets one of the two people destined to change his life. Marla Singer (Helena Bonham-Carter) is about the only physically present female in the film. She is equally lost and addicted to self-help groups. Through a chance encounter on a plane, N meets the second personal force in his new life, the dynamic and self-assured Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), N's antithesis, apparently, in all respects. He's younger, better looking, charismatic, and totally uninhibited.

Then, apparently fortuitously, N has change thrust upon him. His showcase-apartment is destroyed in a gas explosion. Later he learns it was caused by home-made dynamite. He suspects Tyler Durden, but the actual cause is revealed only later. Thinking his old world was "all gone", N turned to Tyler. The two debate N's new situation:

N: I had it all....Now all gone.

TD: All gone. [Pause]

TD: Do you know what a duvet is?

N: Comfort.

TD: It's a blanket. Just a blanket. Why do guys like you and I want duvets? Is this essential to our survival in the hunting and gathering sense of the word? No. What are we?

N: Consumers?

TD: Right, we're consumers. We are by-products of the life-style obsession. Murder, crime, poverty. These things don't concern me. What concerns me is celebrity magazine, television, 500 channels, some guy's name on my underwear, rogaïne, viagra, olestra.

N: Martha Stewart.

TD: Fuck Martha Stewart. Martha's polishing brass on the Titanic. It's all going down, man, so fuck off with your sofa and string green stripe pattern. I say never be complete. I say stop being perfect. I say, the chips fall where they may. [Pause] That's me and I could be wrong. Maybe it's a terrible tragedy.

N: Its just stuff.

TD: You just lost a lot of versatile solutions for modern life.

N: My insurance is probably going to cover it.

TD: Things you own end up owning you. Do what you like.

What he likes at the moment is this new insight, and Tyler Durden is about to offer him a whole other angle on the self-help gig. When the two leave the bar, Durham unexpectedly and inexplicably asks N to hit him. This leads us into another voice-over and flashback, to explain Tyler Durden. Fincher indulges in self-conscious, modernist movie making, bordering on metacinema – an exploration of making movies during the making of a movie. Tyler Durden, we learn, works in a movie theatre changing the reels during the show. Speaking directly to the camera, both characters explain the process of physically and seamlessly changing the reels – and we learn that Tyler Durden intersperses a “big cock” subliminally between the reels. He also practices irreverent, individual rebellion in the kitchen of the luxurious Pressman Hotel, performing acts of gourmet terrorism by adding various obscene bodily fluids to the bubbling dishes. He's an urban guerrilla in the mass consumption society, working invisibly behind the scenes—literally within the consumption—to supposedly undermine it.

What, then, is represented as the opposite of mass consumption? The ratcheting up of physical desire, violence and sex, S&M—where the death instinct collides with uninhibited libido. You have to be stripped down to raw desire before you're anything real. For men, it's violence; for women, debasement.

Although the invitation to a rock-em sock-em fist-fight seems absurd, Tyler and N square off outside the bar in an apparently motiveless bare-fisted fight. No serious damage is done, although each inflicts a lot of pain. It's N's macho initiation. The two are bonded and N moves into Tyler's house, a once grand mansion, now a condemned wreck near a paper mill in the toxic end of town.

As N experiences a downward mobility that hasn't been this rapid since 1929, he recalls his past. He and Tyler shared a similar upbringing. N's Dad left when he was six, leaving for another town with another woman to start another family. He did it every six

years, N says. "Setting up franchises", says Tyler, converting it into a mass consumption metaphor.

For Tyler, freedom meant rejecting the upward mobility trap:

TD: My dad never went to college, so it was real important that I go.

N: That sounds familiar.

TD: So I graduate, call him up long distance, and say, "Dad, now what?" He says, "Get a job".

N: Same here.

TD: Now I'm 25, make my yearly call, say "Dad, now what?" He says, "I don't know. Get married."

N: Hmmm. Not me. You can't get married. I'm a thirty-year old boy.

TD: We're a generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need.

The *Fight Club* adds misogyny to its machismo. The other woman is Martha Singer (not Stewart), the lone female. Just as "things" are temptations that limit freedom, the feminine must be put in its place. Martha is only a background presence in the film until, contemplating suicide, she makes a call for help to N. Personal destruction is the ultimate form of self-help. I'm in a new group now, N says, "for men only" – and he leaves her dangling on the line. But Martha is magnetically drawn to the macho male, and Tyler proceeds to reel her in. In a prolonged orgy of abusive sex, Tyler's sadism is mirrored by Martha's masochism. "At least she's trying to hit bottom," Tyler says. In his philosophy, "Its only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything." A vast gulf, however, separates the dynamiting of N's "things" from the destruction of personhood and self-respect that Tyler inflicts on Martha.

Step by step, Tyler also leads N "closer to hitting the bottom."

Most of the week, N says, he and Tyler play "Ozzie and Harriet". Their libido is sublimated into violence. They live for the weekends because every Saturday night they fight and watch others battle in a fists-only self-help group, the Fight Club. Their lives are given meaning by sado-masochism. As N explains, after fighting, "everything else in your life gets the volume turned down. You could deal with anything." In the ideology of the Club, who you were in the fight club was not who you were anywhere else. You were "cookie dough" at first; afterwards, you were "carved out of wood". Like adolescents after a bruise-up, they wear their lost teeth and bloody gouges like badges, symbols of their masculinity ("show your scars", says Metallica). The Fight Club offers a conversion experience: afterwards, you "were seeing things differently, sizing things up." On the subway, N spies a Gucci underwear ad and asks Tyler, "Is that what a *man* looks like?" Tyler comments: "Self-improvement is masturbation; now, self-destruction. ..." The sentence is unfinished, but Tyler means that destruction is the ultimate creative act.

Tyler Durden's machismo strikes a chord among apparently overly-feminized and emasculated men everywhere. As large numbers of them are attracted to the Fight Club, both as observers and participants, N finds out that, "We were not alone". The

need "was in everyone's face;" Tyler Durden just "made it visible". "It was on the tip of everyone's tongue" and he "gave it a name": Fight Club. Eventually, underground "franchises" sweep the country.

The rules of Fight Club were simple:

1. You don't talk about Fight Club.
2. (Emphatically) You don't talk about Fight Club.
3. When you hear, 'Stop,' the fight's over.
4. Two guys only fighting.
5. One fight at a time.
6. No shirt or shoes.
7. Fights go on as long as they have to.
8. If it's your first time, you have to fight.

N tries to explain the phenomenon: Their generation, he says, "had no great depression, no great war. Our great war is a spiritual war; our great depression is our lives". They were "raised by TV to believe we can all be millionaires, rock stars, or movie gods, but we can't. We're slowly learning that fact and we're very pissed off."

Just when you think the movie has hit the moral "rock bottom", it deteriorates further. In a sickeningly sadistic scene, Tyler holds a gun to the head of an Asian-American convenience clerk, threatening to murder him on the spot. The clerk is Raymond, Tyler learns, after extorting his identity through sheer terror. Raymond was merely a clerk, but he had hoped to become a veterinarian. Now he is going to die. Tyler, though, imposes what he thinks is redemption, not death. He reprieves Raymond with the warning that he'll be back to finish the job unless he changes his life: "If you're not on your way to becoming a veterinarian in six weeks, you'll be dead."

"I feel ill," N exclaims (or was that an echo from the audience)?

Like the anarchist whose bomb is intended to ignite history, Tyler's sadism is putatively both destructive and creative. He comments: "Imagine how Raymond feels. Tomorrow will be the best day of his life." Only the most extreme experiences count. It is a philosophy – as Tyler had said – of self-destruction, of the interface of death and libido. You are never so alive as when you're close to death.

The men who were seeking their hearts of darkness in the local Fight Club were legion. Their Club experience was cult-like. There were no words at the fight, N explains, emphasizing its primitiveness. The "hysterical shouting was in tongues, like in a Pentecostal church." At the end, "nothing was solved, nothing mattered." But "we all felt saved after it was over." The cult initiation entailed the primitive infliction and suffering of pain, lots of blood, and visible scar tissue.

Tyler recruits an army, a cult of bland, nameless followers seeking to be abused and led. The fight-cult breaks them more thoroughly than basic training. They repeat the mantra: "We are not special, not beautiful, not unique snowflakes. We are all the same decaying organic matter as everything else. We are all part of the same compost heap." Dust to dust, ashes to ashes; once we are nothing we can do anything.

Historically, the down-and-out have been recruited to a variety of, principally destructive, causes. Tyler takes his army of black shirts from the Fight Club into larger ops, called Project Mayhem, the first rule of which is "you do not ask questions." The

fact that the targets of these shock-trooper terrorists are the symbols of corporate power and culture doesn't make them "good guys"; rather, it reminds you that even "Nazis" at first called their movement National "Socialist".

The movie would be completely unrelenting if it simply spiralled down to oblivion and destruction. Instead, N doesn't hit bottom. A gulf begins to separate N and Tyler. Molecules of humanity survive in N—in his feelings for Martha; in guilt over the destruction of what was beautiful (externally and internally); and in N's concern for Bob, a guy who had grown large, womanly breasts as a result of hormone therapy following his testicle-ectomy, and who became an accidental casualty of Project Mayhem. N has feelings for the feminized Bob and frets to Tyler, "Bob is dead, they shot him in the head." Tyler merely paraphrases Mao Zedong: "You want to make an omelette, you gotta break some eggs." But Bob wasn't an egg; he was a human being with a name.

These are steps towards self-discovery for N. When Tyler suddenly disappears, N searches for him all over the country, finally rediscovering both himself and the truth about Tyler Durden. N realizes that he encountered Tyler Durden "at a very strange time in my life."

The movie returns to the beginning – if you have had the stomach to stick with it. Tyler has a gun in N's mouth and Project Mayhem is about to culminate in the mass destruction of corporate property. The Oklahoma City bombing would be kindergarten.

So, are we relieved when N manages to free himself from Tyler's grip? Hardly. Too much ugliness has survived, too much hatred has been aroused, too much nothingness has been revealed. It isn't just inside Tyler or the corporate culture; it's in everyone and everything. The *Fight Club* made it visible but, like the narrator, didn't really give it a name. The film is more *fin de siècle* than existential; it blames original sin more than fascism. The destructive worm in creation is inseparably part of our gendered human nature. When you've lost everything of value, only pessimism and despair remain.