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Intro to Critical Methods

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*Fight Club*: Not for Sale

Not a day goes by in which the American does not experience some form of advertisement. From the logo on a t-shirt to the specific pattern on a handbag, advertisements are everywhere. Companies sell their products by using human beings as billboards. Our society is completely monopolized by a culture of consumerism and an obsession with commodities. *Fight Club* (1999), directed by David Fincher, embodies our society’s infatuation with material items and the seductive hold that they have over our lives. *Fight Club* successfully acts as a commentary on consumer culture through the creative and profound use of symbolism.

Consumerism and society’s fascination with possessions are exemplified in the symbol of the narrator’s condo. In the beginning of the film, the narrator has become a slave to what he calls “the Ikea nesting instinct” (*Fight Club*). His condo houses furniture, cups, and appliances that he feels compelled to purchase. He says, “If I saw something clever, like a little coffee table in the shape of a ying yang, I had to have it” (*Fight Club*). He is so engrossed with the ownership of commodities that he defines himself by his material possessions: “I’d flip through catalogs and wonder, what kind of dining set defines me as a person?” (*Fight Club*). His entire life’s value and meaning are measured by the objects he owns. “I had it all. I had a stereo that was very decent, a wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I was close to being complete” (*Fight Club*). The narrator is seduced by the allure of a future, whole self, and as he flips through Ikea magazines, he visualizes this future self, propelled to improvement by the purchase of home goods.

The inability to ever attain this complete person manifests itself in a burdensome condition. The narrator suffers relentlessly from insomnia, sometimes staying awake for four days without any small dose of sleep. This sleeplessness represents the inhibitory power of the consumerist society. The obsession with commodities that plagues our mental schemas prevents individuals from really living. As the narrator tells us, insomnia makes it seem that “everything’s a copy of a copy of a copy” (*Fight Club*). In the same way, the culture of consumerism promotes artificiality, not originality. Life loses its quality of reality and slips into a commercialized experience. In “Culture Jamming” Lasn says that “real living had been replaced by pre-packaged experiences and media-created events” (Lasn 416). The media, publicity, and spirit of consumerism promoted by our culture diminish originality. Even “our most intimate gestures have become stereotypes” (Lasn 418). Each action, each thought, is unavoidably linked to the influence of society that is embedded in our very psyche.

The only way the narrator is able to free himself from the inhibitory power of the culture of commodities is by experiencing true emotions. Pain, fear, and aggression become poignant and waking sources of reality. In a world where even gestures have become stereotyped, he seeks out authenticity, which Lasn says allows one to live “outside structured consciousness long enough to get a taste of real living” (Lasn 419). The narrator begins attending support groups, starting with the “Remaining Men Together” group for males suffering from testicular cancer. Through interactions with these groups, he is able to break down, cry, and let emotions flow. Only then is the narrator able to find peace in the refuge of sleep. Only when we mentally escape from a society so consumed with materialism may we too find a sense of peace and confidence.

This therapeutic group session is where the narrator first encounters Bob, also known as “bitch tits” (*Fight Club*). He learns that Bob was a body builder and that his feminine endowments are the result of steroid abuse. Bob was sucked into the image of the male promoted by advertisement. He bought into the culture that muscles equate with masculinity. Later in the film the narrator says, “I felt sorry for guys packed into gyms trying to look like how Calvin Kline or Tommy Hilfiger said they should” (*Fight Club*). Publicity and the consumer economy dictate how a male should look and act. Bob took the steroids in an effort to strongly accentuate his masculine features as society had standardized them. However, Bob’s body compensated for the intake of testosterone with an increase in estrogen. Then, his testicular cancer took away his most defining masculine feature: his testicles. Bob consequentially spiraled downward: falling into bankruptcy, undergoing a divorce, and estranging himself from his family. In Virginia Wolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* she discusses the idea that the social acceptance of the male as superior is contingent on the understanding of female as inferior. Thus, this social construct of sexual identity creates a deep conflict within Bob. He is unable to justify his masculinity when it is physically intertwined with female characteristics. His social superiority as a male is undercut by his feminine inferiority represented by his breasts and by his castration. According to the article “Sex, Subjectivity & Representation,” differences in men and women are the product of “socioeconomic and cultural constructs rather than the outcome of an eternal biology” (“Sex” 281). Bob is loses all hope in his future because he can no longer match the masculine definition constructed by society, especially that which is represented prominently in publicity such as in the Calvin Kline and Tommy Hilfiger advertisements.

Possibly the most important symbolic element in *Fight Club* is Tyler Durden, the narrator’s unbeknownst split personality. Tyler Durden is attractive, fearless, confident, and independent: the narrator’s ideal self. Tyler says to the narrator: “All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not” (*Fight Club*). Berger would say that Tyler offers the narrator an “improved alternative to what he is” (Berger 142). Advertisement and publicity are so effective because they tap into this insecurity, offering consumers a glamorous, enviable future self, a Tyler. Berger tells us in *Ways of Seeing* that “publicity speaks in the future tense and yet the achievement of this future is endlessly deferred” (Berger 146). People that are controlled by the allure of commodities and the illusion that objects will both define and improve them will be greatly disappointed. Each new purchase, each new possession, only creates a new future self, one that is happy and glamorous, one that by comparison, highlights all the inadequacies in reality.

As Tyler highlighted, the narrator, as a consumer in a culture of commodities, is not free. Berger explains that advertisement and publicity are often related with “freedom of choice for the purchaser” (Berger 131). However, in reality, advertisement limits us, setting “pre-packaged” experiences before us and thereby stifling creativity. Advertisement acts as a “social control, offering the illusion of unlimited choice, but in fact reducing the field of play to a choice of pre-selected experiences” (Lasn 418). Because Tyler is the narrator’s ideal image of self, he is not slave to the same “insidious power of the spectacle” of advertisement (Lasn 418). He is no longer confined by the “mental slavery” of the consumer culture; he is free of the commercialism and free of the conflict between self and ideal because he *is* that ideal*,* not striving to transform any longer. While the narrator is unable to escape the consumer culture, Tyler has the courage to break free from this entrapment. He realizes that:

you are not your bank account. You are not the clothes you wear. You are not the contents of your wallet. You are not your bowel cancer. You are not your grande latte. You are not the car you drive. You are not your fucking khakis. (*Fight Club*)

Tyler, the narrator’s ideal image of self cannot be influenced by the fallacy that an item defines a person. He is able to understand reality, free from the corruption of consumer culture, because he has the bravery to leave that culture entirely. Bravery, unlike an item, is something you cannot buy. According to Lasn’s logic, the “courage to risk being real” separates oneself from one’s ideal self (Lasn 419). The ideal self is free because of this courage, and no commodity can equal or replace that fearlessness to live life untainted by society.

Together, Tyler and the narrator form a fighting club, which, like the support groups, allows the narrator to really live, more free from a society of consumerism. The natural, raw feelings of aggression and pain provide him with a sense of reality. The first time Tyler engages the narrator in a fight, the narrator thinks the prospect of hitting Tyler is completely absurd. Society has instilled this idea in him that violence is wrong. However, this violence and pain allows the narrator to release aggression in a natural and instinctive manner. This instinct undercuts society’s influence. Lasn says that to free oneself from society’s entrapment of consumerism, one has to have “a willingness to take big risks, and a commitment to the pursuit of small, spontaneous moments of truth” (Lasn 414). For the narrator, fighting is this risk, and pain is this truth. Unlike artificialized advertisements that induce emulative desires and unattainable visions of self, pain is natural and sobering. The Fight Club therefore acts as a form of disillusionment for its members. The reality of pain and instinct of pure, primal aggression wash away the conventions of society. Thus, Fight Club allows its members to gain the ability to see past the hypnotizing beliefs and goals that society has embedded into the members’ mentality through advertisement and publicity. Tyler explains this realization:

Man, I see in Fight Club the strongest and smartest men who've ever lived. I see all this potential, and I see it squandered. God damn it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables – slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place… Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars, but we won't. We're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off. (*Fight Club*)

Slowly, the authenticity and primal nature of the fight club allow the members to reject society and even act out against it. The narrator explains: “We all started seeing things differently. Everywhere we went, we were sizing things up” (*Fight Club*). Advertisements and publicity therefore become open to criticism rather than automatically accepted into societal mentality.

Soap, itself an advertisement on *Fight Club*’s movie posters, is a powerful symbol. Tyler Durden makes his living as a soap salesman. He sneaks onto private property to steal human fat from the dumpsters of liposuction clinics. Then he uses this fat to make soap and sell it to department stores for twenty dollars per bar. The narrator sees irony in this profit: “We were selling rich women their own fat asses back to them” (*Fight Club*). This clever scheme presents the fraudulent nature of a consumer society. Often, consumers are convinced they are buying something different than the object; they unconsciously seek to purchase their ideal selves. A culture that advertises using slender models creates a societal acceptance that thin is beautiful. Through liposuction, women can seemingly directly buy their future self rather than a product that will help them reach it. However, liposuction merely changes appearance; it is solely artificial. Soap represents the artificiality of society and its ability to wash away humanity. Consumers become so engrossed with the spectacle of commodities that they lose their humanity, trading it for possessions.

Soap has another meaning specific to *Fight Club*; it represents purity. Tyler, a soap salesman, challenges the influence and value of consumer, capitalist society. He criticizes people for the power that they allow objects to hold in their lives. To Tyler, the societal obsession with products and the control that people let them have over their lives is even more troublesome than crime. He illustrates the necessity to release oneself from the destructive obedience to the reign of commodities:

We're consumers. We are by-products of a lifestyle obsession. Murder, crime, poverty, these things don't concern me. What concerns me are celebrity magazines, television with 500 channels, some guy's name on my underwear…Martha's polishing the brass on the Titanic. It's all going down, man. So fuck off with your sofa units and Strinne green stripe patterns, I say never be complete, I say stop being

perfect, I say let... lets evolve, let the chips fall where they may. (*Fight Club*)

In contrast to the narrator in the beginning of the film, Tyler fully recognizes that objects cannot make a person complete. Only by moving beyond this illusion can we truly evolve and transform ourselves into the people we want to be.

After Tyler teaches the narrator how to make soap, he takes the narrator’s hand, kisses it, and covers it with lye, a powerful chemical ingredient in soap that induces an excruciatingly painful sensation as it burns the flesh. As the narrator tries to meditate to manage the agonizing burning, Tyler continuously forces him to focus on and embrace the pain. Tyler tells the narrator that “without pain, without sacrifice, we would have nothing” (*Fight Club*). In a society in which advertisements systematically program our minds to continuously pursue the acquisition of material items in order to improve ourselves, sacrifice involves giving up these possessions and even giving up the desire to emulate that future self. Tyler says, “It’s only after we’ve lost everything that we’re free to do anything” (*Fight Club*). Society inhibits individualism and self-control over thought and perception unless one frees oneself from it. In this way, Tyler argues to the narrator that the pain he is experiencing “is premature enlightenment” because it allows him to detach himself from the culture of consumerism and gain a newfound freedom (*Fight Club*).

The narrator predicts a future in which the materialistic, consumer society that we have continuously promoted will be more and more prominent: “When deep space exploration ramps up it will be the corporations that name everything, the IBM stellar sphere, the Microsoft galaxy, planet Starbucks” (*Fight Club*). If we continue to allow advertisements to dictate what we should buy, how we should dress, how we should act, and who we should be, the result will be unfortunate. In one particular scene, Tyler gives the fight club members a homework assignment to start a fight with a stranger and lose. Some members hose down priests, while others trip strangers at the work place. The narrator does not elicit violence from a stranger; rather, he literally has a fistfight with himself. This scene symbolically demonstrates that a person immersed in a culture of materialism will surely lose his own identity; he will become a stranger to himself. Just as the narrator resorts to pure, instinctive emotion to awaken his sense of reality and clear the haze of consumerism, so too must we employ our inherent and primal instinct for self-preservation. To maintain a sense of self-identity it is essential to renounce the culture of commodities. We cannot buy into the false hope of self-improvement that objects seem to offer. As the narrator says, “losing all hope was freedom” (*Fight Club*). Once we release a sense of hope for the ideal self promised by material items, we can finally and truly live.

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