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**SOMETHING TO DO WITH A GIRL NAMED MARLA SINGER:
CAPITALISM, NARCISSISM, AND THERAPEUTIC DISCOURSE IN DAVID
FINCHER'S *FIGHT CLUB***

LYNNE LAYTON

Abstract: David Fincher's *Fight Club* well represents the violent effects of capitalism on psychic structure. While offering a critique of the violence wrought by commodity capitalism and technical rationality, and while empathizing with the pain suffered by the narcissistic character structure it fosters, the film simultaneously presents a narrative whose form mimics the damaging effects of capitalism on the male psyche. The film offers two different solutions to the main character's suffering: self-help therapy groups and fight club. The paper argues that the incoherence introduced by a narrative rupture that separates the presentation of the two solutions – a rupture blamed on the film's female protagonist – represents the site of unconscious conflict. Although the film makes it clear that the protagonist's pain is a result of the meaninglessness of his relationships and the immorality of his job, the film yet proffers remasculinization as a solution. In so doing, the film suggests that narcissistic wounds are best treated by shoring up male narcissism.

Arguing that the 'dilemmas of the traumatized male subject are a recurring theme of contemporary cinema' (304), Bainbridge and Yates (2005) capture in their film analyses a sense of masculinity in crisis. Set within a contemporary social context, the analyses reveal twin tendencies toward the emotionalization and 'feminization' of Western culture, tendencies that seem to produce a 'hysterical defense against the perceived trauma of loss and difference' (304). Drawing on media theories that suggest that dominant discourses are always contested by subordinate discourses that circulate in culture, Bainbridge and Yates theorize that, although there has been a general shift toward filmic representations of men who express their emotions, representations of masculinity exist on a continuum. At one pole of this continuum lie what they call fetishistic or rigid masculine representations and at the other pole lie transitional spaces that allow for various renegotiations of masculinity. The authors suggest that films of the 90s perhaps

offered male spectators more possibility for such renegotiations than do recent films; discussing *Fight Club* (1999), for example, they write that because the two male protagonists turn out to be two sides of the same person, the spectator is alerted to ‘the schizoid status of masculinity,’ which forces the spectator ‘to imagine the originary moment of trauma and then to contemplate more radical alternatives’ (307).

In what follows, I look more closely at the nature of the trauma represented in *Fight Club*, a trauma I shall root in cultural conditions that offer increasing opportunities for individualization (in fact, they demand it; see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) on the ‘multi-option’ society) while simultaneously encouraging a narcissistic individualism. After a discussion of the relation between narcissism and capitalism, I suggest that *Fight Club* offers a particularly compelling example of filmic attempts to solve problems posed by the cultural contradictions of neoliberalism and late modernity (Giddens, 1991). *Fight Club* is noteworthy not only because it addresses the crisis of masculinity/autonomy in a free market consumer culture, but also because it invokes therapeutic discourses as possible solutions to cultural crisis.

Capitalism and Narcissism

From the late 70s to the mid-80s, several left wing historians, sociologists, and psychoanalysts took as their object of study the relation between capitalism and narcissistic personality disorder. Christopher Lasch’s (1979) *The Culture of Narcissism*, which drew on contemporary writings on clinical narcissism by Kernberg (1975) and Kohut (1971; 1977), influenced authors such as Kovel (1980), Livesay (1985), Holland (1986), and myself to explore a ‘social character’ that seemed peculiar to our times.¹ The sociological aspect of my own writings on capitalism and narcissism (Layton, 1986; Layton, 1998; Layton, 2010) are influenced by Frankfurt School critiques of capitalism, particularly their focus on the pervasive dominance of instrumental reason, but my psychoanalytic understanding of narcissism is based on Kohut’s (1971; 1977) and Fairbairn’s (1954) definitions (with some additional ideas drawn from Kernberg, 1975). Thus, I see as central to the syndrome a fragility of self structure that results in an oscillation between grandiosity and self-deprecation, and between devaluation and idealization of the other, between longings to merge and isolating defenses against merger. The state shift from grandiosity to self-deprecation, from idealization to devaluation, from merger to isolation, from elation to depression depends, in part, on differences in power relations and relational context – a bully in

one relational matrix can be submissive in another (a classic example is the man who is submissive with his boss but domineering with his wife and children). Emotionally, the shift is notably set off by an empathic break, a slight to the fragile self whose needs for recognition, connection and care have consistently not been met.

Slights evoke what Kohut called narcissistic rage, a punitive, annihilating anger that issues from an archaic harsh and punishing superego. Kernberg's (1975) Kleinian perspective on narcissism, in which rage and hostility are central to the syndrome, adds to this picture an emphasis on the primary defense mechanisms of narcissism: splitting and projective identification. In his explanation of etiology, Kernberg highlights a failure to integrate good and bad representations, self-states, and affects, a failure caused either by traumatic treatment by the environment or by an excessive amount of constitutional aggression. Because of this difficulty integrating good and bad, that is, the difficulty achieving, in Klein's (1946) terms, a somewhat stable depressive position, narcissistic disorder is marked by an inability to tolerate ambivalence and ambiguity. The use of defenses such as splitting and projective identification produces the oscillation between polarized states that is endemic to the disorder.

People suffering from narcissistic personality disorder do not experience themselves as what Kohut described as 'separate centers' of initiative and what Frankfurt School heirs call autonomous selves. This is due to their difficulty differentiating themselves from others. There are at least two relational sequelae of this failure: in one, merger with another stabilizes the fragile self; in the second, a repudiation of the need for the other issues in a pseudo-separation. In either case, those who suffer from a narcissistic psychic structure have difficulty setting their own agenda, as their sense of self-worth is overly dependent on how they are thought of by others. Indeed, they use others, ideas and ideologies, and things – for example, food or consumer goods – as necessary props to shore up what Kohut called 'empty' selves (because so many of his patients spoke of feeling empty, of having an empty depression).²

Psychoanalytic theorists of narcissism tend not to connect narcissistic personality disorder with capitalism (although Kohut does link 'Guilty Man's' eclipse by 'Tragic Man' to certain socio-historical conditions). The Frankfurt School and their heirs have done most of the work that links the two. Like his Frankfurt School influences, Lasch (1977; 1979) located the origins of narcissistic personality disorder in the decline of the patriarchal family and the supposedly firm ego and superego that developed from its oedipal dynamics. He argued that this

decline emerged from the entrenchment of bureaucracy, the eclipse of entrepreneurial by monopoly and consumer capitalism, and the rise of a reliance on experts. It is especially the latter, according to Lasch, that increasingly weakens the autonomy of the individual. As many feminists were to point out, the villains of Lasch's piece were not just capitalism and bureaucracy, but female dominated families and a 'feminized' culture (see, for example, Engel; 1980). Refuting Lasch and the Frankfurt School on this point, feminist theorists such as Jessica Benjamin (1977; 1988) charged that the very oedipal dynamics they idealize in fact create the version of autonomy that defensively devalues emotionality, vulnerability, and dependency, a kind of autonomy marked by pseudo-differentiation and pseudo-rationality. Autonomy, in Western culture, has been understood to rest not on mutual interdependence but on radical aloneness. And it is this narcissistic autonomy that has been associated with traditional ideal versions of white heterosexual masculinity.

Kovel (1980; 1988) and Livesay (1985) focused their understanding of narcissism not only on the decline of autonomous selves but on the decline of any sense of collectivity or social selfhood. Agreeing with Lasch that what produces narcissism are the core features of late capitalism – a massive state apparatus, experts that delegitimize parents, especially when both parents have to work, mass media, and consumerism – Kovel (1988) argued that the late capitalist bourgeois family, cut off from any direct influence on politics or production, is an increasingly isolated unit whose functions have been reduced over time to the raising of children and to consuming goods. A 'de-sociated' entity of intense and contradictory kinds of relating, the middle-class family's children are simultaneously made to feel special and omnipotent, and they are infused with the anxieties of the parents' unfulfilled dreams. Narcissistic rage, Kovel argues, arises from the awareness of being loved not just for who they are but for the return they can bring on their parents' investment in them. These children of contemporary middle-class families might not suffer gross trauma, but nonetheless they become hostilely dependent on and enraged at their parents because, at some level, they are aware that their parents' relation to them has 'the quality of capital invested for a future yield' (1988: 197). Narcissism, then, is a disorder of differentiation and dependency, which best explains a paradox frequently noted by commentators on US social character: the odd co-existence of defiant self-reliance and anxious dependence on what experts tell you to do and what the Joneses tell you to buy.³

Both Livesay and Sloan (1996) draw attention to the fact that, in late capitalist society, bureaucracy, markets, the media, and other cultural apparatuses undermine at every juncture the necessary preconditions for autonomy and intersubjectivity: the capacity to differentiate from the other without repudiating the other, the capacity to tolerate ambivalence, the capacity for mature dependence (Fairbairn, 1954), and the recognition of mutual interdependence. As Frankfurt School theorists have always warned (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944), the fantasmatic drive to predict, calculate, and standardize contingency out of existence leads also to the standardization of internal life, which quashes spontaneity and so issues in automatic responses and defenses that impede the possibility to reflect on the self – another pre-requisite of autonomy.

Masculinity, Femininity and Narcissism

While writing about narcissism was popular in the late 70s to the mid to late 80s, the whole notion of social character was somewhat eclipsed by the academic focus on aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality, and race. In part, the eclipse had to do with the fact that class dropped out of these analyses as well as to the tendency, from the 70s to late 80s, to study one identity element at a time rather than their intersection – and to claim that the one element under examination, for example, gender oppression, could explain all other types of oppression. Feminist psychoanalytic film studies of the 70s and 80s did indeed, however, describe a narcissistic male psychic structure, even if the term narcissism was not used. Mulvey's (1975) version of the Lacanian imaginary, for example, overlaps in significant ways with the Kohutian definition of narcissism (although not at all with its etiology).

Extending Chodorow's (1978) object-relational gender theory and Benjamin's (1988) work on gendered versions of domination and submission, I argued in *Who's That Girl?* (Layton, 1998) that capitalist and patriarchal formations have together promoted dominant 'ideal' versions of masculinity and femininity that split and render mutually exclusive human longings for both agency and connection. In traditional dominant forms of masculinity, so-called masculine attributes crystallize around a kind of autonomy that arises when one receives recognition and esteem from the repudiation of connections and the dependency needs that go along with them; this version of subjectivity remains a cultural ideal in the US and is increasingly inhabited as well by middle-class women (Layton, 2004a,b). Traditionally feminine attributes crystallize

around a kind of connection or relatedness that arises when one is consistently not recognized and/or humiliated for asserting one's own agenda. These split masculine and feminine subject positions incarnate two different versions of narcissism. Although all who suffer from narcissistic disorder show both sides of these splits, generally people lead with one set of defenses and hide the other side. Thus, one dominant masculine version of narcissism articulates grandiosity with devaluation of the other and with isolating defenses against merger, while a traditionally dominant female version articulates self-deprecation, idealization of the other, and a defensive longing to merge and lose oneself in the other (Layton, 1988). Because it is a dialectical disorder, the two types tend to seek out one another to couple, generally causing lifelong misery as each tries to heal the split in ways that simply fortify it. To fully understand the narcissistic injury brought about by the demand to split off longings such as dependency or agency is to recognize that such longings do not disappear from the psyche. Indeed, those who repudiate dependency keep their distance from connection precisely because they are extremely vulnerable to any kind of rejection. Ashamed of and full of self loathing for continuing to have dependency longings, any stirring of them produces defensive enactments and narcissistic rage.

What definitively got lost in filmic gender studies of the 70s and 80s was the connection between gender theory and capitalism or class (an exception is Walkerdine, 1986). Now that social class is back on the academic radar screen and there is agreement on the necessity of analyzing the way identity elements intersect, it seems a good time to return to the relation between gender, race, class, narcissism and capitalism, this time with the advantage of the more sophisticated analyses of the way ideology works that we find in the theories of Hall (1982), Laclau and Mouffe (1985), Stavrakakis (2007), Glynos (2008), and Žižek (1989). What those who write about capitalism and narcissism tell us is that key to the production of narcissism is the radical separation of the individual from the social that marks US culture, and the fact that capitalism's instrumental forms of domination find their way into the very heart of the family. And what feminist theory suggests is that the repudiation of dependency, demanded by both that radical separation and by disavowal, finds its way also into split, narcissistic gender/race/class/sexual identities. Those theorists, like myself, who feel that psychoanalysis can most fruitfully be used to understand social character, generally believe that a given era engenders particular collective psychological responses to its social contradictions, particular kinds of transferences and particular repetition compulsions.

Popular Culture and Therapeutic Culture

Fantasy productions symbolize and seek solutions to the psychic problems that a culture of narcissism creates. So-called ‘chick flicks,’ for example, wrestle with the seeming impossibility to integrate relatedness and agency. And the ‘crisis of masculinity’ films analyzed by Bainbridge and Yates reflect, among other things, the longing to find a way out of the paradoxical command to be both self-reliant and emotionally sensitive and connected. But what we often find in ‘crisis of masculinity’ texts is that the threats to male autonomy are located not in the contradictions of capitalism and class domination from which they originate, but rather in women, blacks, the poor, and other subjects onto whom the despised dependency and need have been ragefully projected. Narrative incoherencies that signal the unconscious of these works often simultaneously reveal and conceal the dread of dependency and vulnerability that ever more starkly marks the US culture in which they were produced (especially after 9/11 and the economic crisis of 2008).

In following the Frankfurt School and its heirs, my cultural analysis thus far has not been as dialectical as it needs to be to understand the complexity of contemporary subjectivity. Like Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) as well as Giddens (1991), I do believe that the disembedding from all traditional anchors of selfhood that has rapidly increased since the end of World War II has both progressive and anti-progressive moments. Individualization, the opportunity and the demand to create a life of one’s own exists in tension with narcissistic individualism (or what I and others have called neoliberal versions of subjectivity, see Layton, 2010). As Giddens (1991) writes, the do-it-yourself biography teeters on the edge of an ever-present possibility that it will become a breakdown biography. There is no question that, as Bainbridge and Yates (2005) suggest, contemporary popular representations of masculinity ‘open up spaces in which alternative modes of masculinity can be imagined through the affectively-nuanced process of spectatorship that they demand’ (306-7). And their notion of a continuum well captures the reality that a ‘masculinity in crisis’ narrative sometimes resolves in a rigid narcissism and sometimes in the opening of transitional space.

Affects such as anger can, in fact, put one more deeply in touch with the self and others – or they can defensively function to tear down self and others. To account for what they understand to be a fairly recent shift in Western culture toward valuing emotional expression,

Richards and Brown (2002) have argued that we live in a ‘therapeutic culture’, the key features of which are expressivity (id), knowledge (ego), and compassion (superego). To be authentically therapeutic, however, they argue that such a cultural constellation must also include a reparative impulse (101). Without such an impulse an ‘id-type emotionality’ substitutes for what they call ‘thoughtful feeling.’ Like Bainbridge and Yates, Richards and Brown are mindful of the tension between the progressive possibilities of therapeutic culture, in which emotionality is linked with thought, and its regressive possibilities, in which emotionality is linked with sentimentality, false selves, and artifice.

Popular media can, as the authors suggest, clearly promote thoughtful feeling-type expressions of therapeutic culture. In clinical work, I have often found that patients use popular media representations as one means of forging identifications that counter the restrictive and damaging identifications on offer in their families: for example, one patient used Patrick Stewart’s version of masculinity in *Star Trek* to contest his conviction that only macho versions of masculinity counted as masculine (see Layton, 1998: Ch. 7). Another used the same figure to enable her to reflect on alternative modes of leadership besides the sado-masochistic ones to which she continued to find herself prey.

Media texts, however, are complex phenomena. As Jameson (1979) pointed out many years ago, popular texts’ popularity is in no small measure due to their tendency to combine both progressive and anti-progressive elements, and they do so in various ways, for example, by creating contradictory identificatory and transference possibilities, or by throwing up contradictions between form and content (where, for example, anti-progressive form might undercut progressive content). Promoting both id-type and thoughtful feeling versions of emotional expression, popular texts provide audiences with both non-normative and normative transference possibilities. They may provoke in the spectator what I have referred to as normative unconscious processes or enactments (Layton, 2006), inviting unconscious collusions with such oppressive norms as sexism or racism. At the same time, since meaning can never be fixed and identities are fluid, the very same popular texts may well invite unpredictable decodings that challenge oppressive norms and normative transferences (Hall, 1980). And media texts contain unconscious subtexts that defy the intentionality of their authors and that disrupt any possibility of narrative coherence.

David Fincher's 1999 film, *Fight Club* provides a compelling example of these popular culture theses as it wrangles with the fine lines existing between a culture of individualization and a culture of narcissistic individualism. After numerous viewings and numerous teaching experiences (in which I have found that students see the film very differently from how I see it – an argument for the necessity of audience studies), I continue to find the film puzzling in its strange mixture of anti-capitalist critique and simultaneous proffering of id-type and thoughtful feeling-type solutions. Indeed, in the film, therapeutic discourse is evoked as a solution to the protagonist's cultural malaise, only to be abruptly discarded and replaced by a sadistic and violent discourse (that itself, at times, draws on psychological narratives). Narrative discontinuities seem to signal the film's confusion in this regard. In what follows, I offer my own reading of the film and end with some alternative readings. I hope along the way to elucidate some of the normative and non-normative transference possibilities that arise from the film's particular way of linking masculinity, narcissism and capitalism.

Fight Club

Fight Club came out in 1999, at the end of two decades of filmic testaments to white male anger. So many of these films – an uncommonly large number of which starred Michael Douglas – pinned blame for threats to male autonomy squarely on women. A prime example is Barry Levinson's (1994) *Disclosure*, in which Michael Douglas is passed over for an expected promotion that goes instead to Demi Moore, an ex-girlfriend. Moore engineers a scene that makes it look as though Douglas sexually harassed her, and most of the film focuses on Douglas's attempts to clear his name, which he does at the end. At one or two moments, the film's class unconscious erupts and it becomes clear that the real causes of Douglas's and other unemployed men's problems are the machinations of upper class male bosses focused solely on the bottom line. But this truth is very much background to the foreground fear of female emasculators.

Fight Club is far more explicitly critical of capitalism than most films in the white male anger genre. Its protagonists are also younger than those the genre usually depicts. And yet, rage about the way capitalism and hegemonic masculinity thwart longings both for agency and connection are deflected onto women in this film as well. Like Lasch's analysis of narcissism, the film simply cannot seem to decide whether or not its male protagonists' problems are caused

by instrumentalized, meaningless, and morally bankrupt work; emotional isolation; parental abandonment, particularly abandonment by fathers; and consumer capitalism – or if their problems are caused by feminization, mothers, and females in general. Consumerism, as is often the case, is figured as feminine, and, in several pivotal scenes, blame slips incoherently from fathers and capitalism to mothers and to the film's sole female character, Marla Singer.

In brief, *Fight Club* is the story of a 30-something man (Ed Norton) who is mildly critical of the consumer culture and meaningless job that define his life. He can't sleep, and, in the first part of the film, he seeks relief from his insomnia by frequenting many self-help groups. Marla Singer's (Helena Bonham Carter) presence at the same groups ruins this solution for him, and after his apartment mysteriously blows up, destroying all his possessions, he goes to live with Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), a soap manufacturer and explosives specialist he sat next to on a plane during a business trip. He and Tyler start fight club, a weekly meeting where men gather to beat each other up. Men are drawn to fight club like moths to flame, and fight clubs begin to proliferate all over the country. Tyler develops various homework assignments designed to turn the members of fight club into an anti-conformist corps of revolutionaries dedicated to the destruction of consumer capitalism and the remasculinization of men. Simultaneously, Tyler begins to have sex with Marla Singer, which makes the narrator feel marginalized and rejected. As Project Mayhem, Tyler's plan to blow up consumer debt institutions, proceeds, the narrator becomes more and more uncomfortable with Tyler's authoritarian and dehumanizing leadership style; what began as a philosophy of radical anti-conformity seems to have devolved into sadomasochistic ways of obliterating individuality and demanding complete obedience to the charismatic leader. As the narrator intervenes to stop Project Mayhem from going forward, he – and, simultaneously, the audience – discovers that he and Tyler are, in fact, the same person. Realizing that Marla is in danger of being killed by his own troops, he rescues her and kills off his Tyler self. The film ends as he and Marla, holding hands, watch the buildings blow up.

In the first frames of *Fight Club*, Tyler forces a gun down the narrator's throat on the top floor of a skyscraper, and the narrator's voiceover suggests that something terrible is about to happen, buildings are about to blow up, and that he knows this because Tyler knows it. At this point, the audience presumes that Tyler is someone separate from the narrator. In a terrifying foreshadowing of September 11, only with young white male protagonists who are closer kin to 1999's homegrown Columbine shooters than to Muslim terrorists, Tyler announces they are

standing at Ground Zero. The narrator's voiceover says, 'We have front row seats for this theater of mass destruction.' The narrator, a former yuppie turned revolutionary, is filmed in anxious close-up, face sweating. While the narrator worries about whether or not the gun in his mouth is clean, Tyler, filmed at butt and penis level, is cocksure and proud of the destruction they are about to wreak, the reduction to 'smoldering rubble' of a few square blocks of buildings in which the business of consumer capitalism is transacted. The narrator and Tyler incarnate the two oscillating states of one narcissistic personality: one conformist, dependent, and self-deprecating, the other rebellious, antisocial, and grandiose. As two, we can mistake one for feminine and the other for masculine, which is one of the film's misogynist strategies. The secret to understanding the disorder, however, is to recognize them as one, the product of splitting two sets of human capacities, connection and agency – for only when the split off side is owned can these two distortions become something other than monstrous.

The feminization of the narrator makes him as well the locus of the film's avowed and disavowed homoerotic desire. The narrator next says, 'That old thing, how you always hurt the one you love? Well, it works both ways.' Throughout the film, such homoerotic confessions are immediately taken back as the narrator locates the blame for all of what has happened not on Tyler, but on a woman: 'Suddenly I realize that all of this – the gun, the bombs, the revolution – has got something to do with a girl named Marla Singer.'⁴ The film then cuts to the self-help group for testicular cancer, 'Remaining Men Together,' and we see the narrator's dazed and sleep-deprived face shmooshed between Bob's 'bitch tits.' Bob intones: 'We're still men.' The narrator responds in monotone, 'Yes, we're men; men is what we are.' And then he tells the sad tale of Bob, a former body-builder whose attempt to be hyper-masculine through use of steroids and too much testosterone left him without balls, and now with breasts. The theme has something to do with failed masculinity and the blame seems to lie with men who bought into a cultural fantasy about perfect bodies. But also, the film makes visible a wish that the narrator's symptom, terrible insomnia, might be cured by a world without women, here by a man with breasts, later by the male only fight club. Just as Bob gives the narrator permission to cry, the narrator stops the narration again. He tells the audience, in direct address, that he needs to go back further in time so that all this information about castrated men and buildings that are about to blow up will make sense to them.

In this second attempt to find the right place to begin the story, the narrator tells us more about himself. He works for a major car manufacturer, and his job is to investigate car accidents and calculate mathematically whether or not it is in his company's interest to initiate a recall or rather quietly to settle an insurance claim and be done with it, even if the car is, to quote Ralph Nader, unsafe at any speed. He's single, isolated, travels a lot for work, knows exactly how immoral his job is, and he creates what meaning there is in his life, indeed, creates a personality, via consumerism: 'Like so many others,' he says, describing his generation, 'I had become a slave to the Ikea nesting instinct.'

The narrator, who fittingly remains nameless, has not been able to sleep for six months. Subjection to a meaningless bureaucracy, to a kind of rationality that puts the cash bottom-line before any other set of values, to the pressure to fill an empty self with consumer goods recommended by experts and endorsed by peers, to disrupted possibilities for social connection – these are the quickly sketched-in origins of the character's malaise. So how does a girl named Marla come to take the blame?

Seeking respite from his social symptom, severe insomnia, the narrator goes to a doctor who refuses to give him sleeping pills. His rage at the doctor is visibly marked by a quick flash in which Tyler appears, a clue (admittedly difficult to decipher) that the way the narrator will psychically resolve his problem will be to split his self and project onto Tyler his rage at those who have failed to recognize his vulnerability and his needs, those who deny him care. In the film, those who do so are just about always men. The doctor suggests that if he wants to see real pain, he should attend a self-help group for men with testicular cancer. And so he comes to 'Remaining Men Together' and the scene with Bob. Now we learn that what cured the narrator's symptom was the moment at the end of the self-help group when the leader has people pair off and open themselves up to the other. Bob gives him permission to cry; eventually the narrator's cynical distance gives way and he sobs into Bob's breasts to the sound of medieval religious music. And then he tells us how well he slept that night.

After a year of treating his symptom in this way, going each night to a different group of sick and dying people, Marla Singer shows up, ghostly and Goth and smoking her way through the same self-help cancer meetings that the narrator attends, including 'Remaining Men Together.' The narrator can no longer cry because, as he puts it: 'Her lie reflected my lie.' Because he could no longer cry, he could no longer sleep.

The narrator tries to get Marla to stop attending meetings, and Marla asks him why these groups matter so much to him. He says: 'I don't know. When people think you're dying they listen to you, instead of ...' Marla finishes his sentence, 'Instead of waiting for their turn to speak.' 'Yeah, yeah.' This interchange indicts a narcissistic world in which the chances for subject to subject relating in everyday life are almost nil. In moments such as this, the film crucially links capitalism with the destruction of capacities for intimacy. But the narrator cannot sustain awareness of this connection. Instead, Marla is blamed for ruining this one chance the narrator has found to feel alive and recognized. They agree to split up the different groups between them, and Marla disappears from the narrative for a while.

And now the film takes a very different turn, one that I have always found narratively incoherent, and, for this reason, symptomatic. The narrator, again afflicted with insomnia and praying that the plane he's on will crash or have a mid-air collision, is seated next to Tyler, who is dressed in 70s Superfly attire. The narrator again suggests that his ills derive from capitalism's destruction of capacities for relating in a meaningful way, telling us that the 'single-serving friends' he meets on the plane pretty much exhaust his social life – 'between take-off and landing we have our time together. That's all we get.' When the narrator arrives home from this particular trip, he discovers that his apartment and all his belongings have blown up. In the rubble, he finds Marla's number and he calls her, but when she picks up, he hangs up. He calls Tyler instead, and so he chooses to address his pain by conjuring a macho alter whose compelling critique of consumer capitalism is only part of his attraction: the other part is his conscienceless fucking, fighting, and authoritarian exploitation of others. While the call to Tyler reflects the narrator's choice at that moment for a certain kind of re-masculinization, a violent, exploitive, and misogynist kind, the call to Marla reflects the unconscious of the film, the narrator's wish for a different solution to the meaninglessness of his life than the one fight club represents. The different solution is at least partly captured in the self-help groups, which the narrative discards the same way Tyler discards Marla after fucking her. Perhaps what the final conflagration has to do with a girl named Marla Singer is that the narrator was more afraid to call her than he was to call Tyler.

The unconscious symptom of the film is reflected in the narrator's difficulty establishing a narrative. A narrative incoherence separates part one, in which the cure to the character's ills lies in mourning losses in a context of what he considers to be meaningful relating, and part two,

in which the cure lies in the kind of sadomasochistic male bonding that denigrates women as it claims for itself a revolutionary subject position that in fact looks more like a militarized hate group than like the anti-globalization movements that currently fight global capitalism.

The oscillation between capitalism critique and misogyny is repeated in the next scene. After the narrator calls Tyler, they meet at a bar, and he tells Tyler that all his things are gone:

Tyler: It could be worse. A woman could cut off your penis while you sleep and toss it out of the window of a moving car.

Then Tyler asks him if he knows what a 'duvet' is, and, of course, the narrator does. Tyler launches into a critique of consumer capitalism:

Tyler: What are we then?

Narrator: I dunno. Consumers.

Tyler: Right. We're consumers. We are byproducts 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. Rogaine. Viagra. Olestra.

Narrator, interjecting: Martha Stewart.

Tyler (shouting): Fuck Martha Stewart.

And he says it's all going down (Martha Stewart was, indeed, about to 'go down' for the kind of unethical business practices that would soon after be understood to be endemic to neoliberal capitalism.). Tyler finishes his tirade: 'The things you own end up owning you.'

Tyler's analysis recalls that of Lasch, blaming it all on women, feminizing consumer capitalism as if capitalism has anything to do with femininity. He does so not just by summing it all up in the figure of Martha Stewart, which is precisely what the media did in 2004. The blame is also evident in Tyler's first comment about the worse fate being castration by a woman. And while this comment goes by as quickly as the subliminal cuts of Tyler do before his character is introduced, we should note the fear that's expressed here: the subtext of the film figures women

not just as agents of castration, but also as agents of rejection who could toss your penis out the window.

It is in the next scene that fight club is initiated, and here again we can glimpse a fear of rejection behind a surface bravado. The narrator and Tyler leave the restaurant and the narrator says goodnight. Tyler is astounded by the fact that even after 3 pitchers of beer, the narrator can't ask him if he can stay with him. 'Cut the foreplay,' Tyler says, 'and just ask, man.' The narrator asks, Tyler accepts, and then Tyler asks for his favor – hit me as hard as you can. As Steve Neale (1983) has written, the very intimation of male homoeroticism on screen usually gives way to sado-masochistic fireworks, and this film, a male buddy movie of sorts and, as I said earlier, certainly part of the 80s and 90s 'oppressed white male' film genre, canonizes male on male aggression as a solution to emasculation. So the aggression defends against the desire. But I think one could argue that the erotic desire itself defends against the longing for intimacy, and it is this longing against which the film consistently defends, perhaps right through to the end. Male dependency and vulnerability is the last taboo (bedrock, Freud (1937) would have called it), not male homoeroticism.

And why is the narrator so terribly vulnerable, so defended against narcissistic wounding? The film tells us that the narrator and Tyler both hate their parents. Shortly after they begin to expand fight club and remasculinize men, there is a scene in which Tyler is in the bathtub and the narrator is sitting on the floor of the bathroom, treating his wounds.

Tyler: If you could choose, who would you fight?

Narrator: I'd fight my boss probably.

Tyler: Really!

Narrator: Yeah, why? Who would you fight?

Tyler: I'd fight my dad.

Narrator: I don't know my dad. I mean I know him, but ... He left when I was like, six years old. Married this other woman and had some other kids. He did this every six years. He changes city and starts a new family.

Tyler: Fucker's setting up franchises! My dad never went to college. So it was real important that I go.

Narrator: That sounds familiar.

Tyler: So I graduate. Call him up long distance, I say, 'Dad, now what?' He says, 'Get a job.'

Narrator: Same here.

Tyler: Now I'm 25. Make my yearly call again. Say, 'Dad, now what?' He says, 'I dunno. Get married.'

Narrator, interjecting: I can't get married. I'm a 30 year old boy.

At which point, the critique of long-distance abandoning dads breaks off and once again yields to female-bashing:

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

Several other scenes also locate the source of the narrator's problems in rejection and abandonment. In one scene, Tyler, slapping the narrator around after pouring lye on his hand, yells: 'Our fathers were our models for God. If our fathers bailed, what does that tell you about God? Listen to me. You have to consider the possibility that God does not like you. He never wanted you. In all probability He hates you. This is not the worst thing that could happen.' 'It isn't?' the narrator asks. 'We don't need him ... Fuck damnation, man. Fuck redemption. We are God's unwanted children, so be it.' After this scene, the narrator begins to act like Tyler.

For all its critique of capitalism, what the film flirts with but fails to articulate are capitalism's connections to a dominant version of masculinity that has traditionally been tied to an 'autonomy' based in a denial of dependence and interdependence. This version of autonomy psychologically carries capitalism's assault against possibilities of achieving the kind of intimacy and connection for which the narrator yearns. In neoliberal times, this version of autonomy's tie to masculinity has been loosened, but, in the US, it has become the dominant version of autonomy on offer to white middle-class subjects. *Homo entrepreneur* (du Gay, 2004; Foucault, 2008; Read, 2009), the 'proper' subject of neoliberalism, can be gendered male or female – but this version of subjectivity, as Kovel presciently foresaw, is marked by a reality in which all relations are infected by the market logic of investment for a future yield, of what is cost-effective and what maximizes opportunity. Films such as *Fight Club* can be understood as part of

a backlash that blames women for the loss of real autonomy that men and women alike have sustained in the wake of neoliberalism: where social risk has been shifted from collectives to individuals, where social problems are responded to with market-based solutions, where the social contract that offered at least a modicum of good social objects on which one could conceivably depend is repeatedly violated, and, thus, where individuals focus their concern on self-care rather than social citizenship. When you look closely at what happens both in the film and the novel on which it is based (Palahniuk, 1996), it becomes clear that the narrator splits himself into two not because he needs to be remasculinized by Tyler, but as a defense against the wounds caused by repeated humiliations and abandonments that come from both individual and institutional sources. Humiliating slights from his father, the medical system, his boss; the way he is instrumentally used by others, even Tyler, are visible in the film but are avenged by blaming Marla and seeking solace in an all-male, authoritarian, violent organization. The narrative is incoherent because the narrator's chosen solutions enact his split off rage and defend against experiencing the narcissistic wounds that caused the rage in the first place.

Alternate Interpretations

In this essay, I have played with a few different popular culture theories to account for filmic representations of a crisis of white middle-class heterosexual masculinity: Richards and Brown on id-type versus thoughtful feeling-type emotionality (and the implications for therapeutic culture); Bainbridge and Yates on the continuum from rigidified representations of masculinity to representations that open transitional space for possible renegotiations of masculinity; Jameson's reflections on the reified and utopian possibilities on offer in most media representations that become very popular; and theories about the unconscious subtexts that disrupt narrative coherence. What theory needs to account for is the contradictory qualities of any popular text and how those contradictions contend with what I have taken here to be a central contemporary problematic for all cultural subjects: the tension between a narcissistic individualism and opportunities for individualization (the latter of which, in *Fight Club*, are simultaneously allowed to the leaders and refused to the nameless followers).

Jameson's thesis on contradiction, Hall's (1980) thesis that culture enacts hegemonic struggle between dominant and subordinate discourses taken up differently by different audiences, and the idea that texts have unconscious subtexts all suggest we look for other

possible interpretations of the film besides my own, and, as I mentioned earlier, my students through the years have helped me see these other possibilities. In one alternate interpretation, the film can be seen to narrate the way a macho and narcissistic version of masculinity utterly fails to cure the ills of anomic modern existence. Evidence for this reading lies in the fact that when the narrator realizes that Project Mayhem has spun completely out of control, he destroys Tyler, his split off macho alter. It is Tyler, though, who in fact has all the left-wing charm and who voices the critique of consumer capitalism. Nonetheless, perhaps the film recognizes that his version of masculinity, based as it is in a hatred of women and what they culturally stand for, leads to an impersonal destruction of self, others, and any sense of connection. Indeed, the film's turning point is the death of Bob, the narrator's old self-help partner in the testicular cancer survivors' group, 'Remaining Men Together.' Against Tyler and against the 'rules' of Project Mayhem, the narrator insists that Bob's human dignity and specificity be recognized.

As I mentioned earlier, there is also evidence in the film that the narrator is unclear from the outset whether it is Marla or Tyler who provides the key to solving his troubles. In this reading, the narrator becomes a real revolutionary only when he rejects Tyler's version of masculinity, the violent and authoritarian organization this version spawns, and his hostility toward Marla and women in general. Realizing that Project Mayhem is killing the very humanity it was created to save, the narrator saves Marla from the destruction his own rageful fantasy is about to enact. In the final scene, he and Marla hold hands and watch the symbols of consumer capitalism blow up, which perhaps suggests that Tyler has found a way to value love and connection while holding on to his desire to destroy capitalism.⁵ But even if this ending suggests that one can remain human and still wish to destroy capitalism, it can nonetheless only be read as an individual and not a collective solution – perhaps too much to ask of a Hollywood film. For the film definitely does not imagine a functioning revolutionary collective but rather an authoritarian hierarchy in which the minions are encouraged to conform to the leader's rules and not to think or ask questions.

Indeed, a third psychoanalytic reading, one that takes account of the individualist strain of the film, might argue that, as in a dream, Marla, Tyler, and the narrator are all parts of one person and that Tyler can only disappear when the narrator connects with the part of himself represented by Marla. Evidence for this interpretation includes the fact that Marla takes the place of the narrator's power animal in his meditation and that Marla is a ghostlike figure who walks

out into traffic and doesn't die. The narrative perhaps makes most sense, best coheres, with this interpretation. But it took several viewings and a few student comments for me to find this way of establishing some narrative coherence, and that is because the film's excitement derives neither from Marla's filmic presence, which is rare, nor from the narrator's struggle to acknowledge those parts of himself that humanize him. Not only are such moments of struggle few, but they are mostly repudiated explicitly in the narrative. The weight of the narrative is on narcissistic masculinity as a solution to both the problems of consumer capitalism and emasculation; most of the film's pleasure comes from fight club, not from its dissolution in the final frames or from the hero's early flirtation with self-help groups.

Conclusion

Regardless of the interpretation that most speaks to us, it is clear that both fight club and the narrator's insomnia emerge from a social structure that splits autonomous from relational capacities and does so in support of a neoliberal, global order of consumer and finance capitalism. The result of this split is narcissistic self structure and narcissistic relations: urges either to conform or to rebel in a violent form stem from experiences of never feeling good enough, never feeling listened to, never feeling connected to others in any but exploitive ways. The film and its narrative structure reveal the intimate connection between capitalism and the kind of injury in the private sphere that produces a narcissistic defensive autonomy. This version of autonomy wreaks violence on the self and the environment; it disparages relations with others as it struggles against a dreaded dependency and vulnerability. Because the narration chooses as its dominant solution the very narcissistic masculinity that is a source of the problem, it well illustrates the way normative unconscious processes work (Layton, 2002; 2006). Hurt by dominant forms of masculinity and femininity, the male characters, who know consciously who and what the real enemies are, nonetheless are pulled unconsciously to repeat the very dynamics that caused their problem in the first place.

A psychoanalytic reading of the film could easily focus only on the critique of capitalism, the denial of loss and the film's critique of the fantasy that all loss can be made good by the right consumer products. But any psychoanalytic reading that omits the many things the narrator has to say about his failed relationships will miss that important link between social character and capitalism for which I am trying to make the case. It is through looking at the historical

specificity of the characters' relationships that we can move from the particular to any kind of meaningful analysis of the collective. And, as I have suggested, the film downplays the only thing that can possibly give it narrative sense – the narrator's experience of repeated rejections and abandonments by friends, lovers, parents and society. The film reveals as well that what makes women easy to villainize is not that they represent castration or lack, but rather that they are made, unfairly, to represent the agents of rejection and abandonment.⁶ In the novel, in fact, the real target of the explosives is not capitalism but the national museum, the dead white abandoning fathers. A reading of the film's unconscious suggests that we have to look for the roots of omnipotent grandiose destructiveness in the way capitalism and traditional forms of dominant masculinity instrumentalize both public and private relationships, creating narcissistic wounds that are not in fact healed but rather are fortified by consumerism, misogyny and homophobia.

Lynne Layton, PhD is Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology, Harvard Medical School. She has taught courses on women and popular culture and on culture and psychoanalysis at Harvard College, and she currently teaches and supervises at the Massachusetts Institute for Psychoanalysis. She is co-editor of *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, Associate Editor of *Studies in Gender & Sexuality* and on the editorial board of *Free Associations*. Her private practice is in Brookline, MA.

Notes

¹ The notion of 'social character' itself derives from the work of early left-wing analysts such as Otto Fenichel (1953), Wilhelm Reich (1972), and Erich Fromm (1941). This work was further elaborated by Frankfurt School theorists: Fromm's (1941) 'modern man,' escaping from freedom via conformity, and Adorno et al.'s (1950) authoritarian personality both bear more than a passing resemblance to the narcissistic personality Kohut and Kernberg were to elaborate in the 1970s and 80s.

² I still find Kohut's definition of narcissism compelling, although I have come to believe that narcissistic selves are not marked by a deficit of structure and lack of conflict, as Kohut argued, but rather by what Kernberg (1975) and Fairbairn (1954) identified as pathological, conflict-ridden psychic structures.

³ This is, of course, a very different interpretation of the role of experts in late modernity than that offered by, for example, Beck (1999), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) and Giddens (1991). But perhaps what gets lost in their analyses is the 'dark side' of expertise so well chronicled by, for example, Rose (1990).

⁴ It is worth noting that the first chapter of the novel (Palahniuk, 1996), unlike the film's first scene, does NOT end with the statement about Marla's guilt. Rather, it ends with the Norton character trying to find a way out of being murdered by his alter ego. In the book version, the statement about hurting the one you love is taken back in a different way. The narrator says:

We have a sort of triangle thing going here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla.
Marla wants me.
I don't want Marla, and Tyler doesn't want me around, not anymore. This isn't
about love as in caring. This is about *property* as in *ownership*.

Without Marla, Tyler would have nothing.
 Five minutes.
 Maybe we would become a legend, maybe not. No, I say, but wait. Where would
 Jesus be if no one had written the gospels?
 Four minutes.
 I tongue the gun barrel into my cheek and say, you want to be a legend, Tyler,
 man, I'll make you a legend. I've been here from the beginning.
 I remember everything.
 Three minutes. (14-15).

I underline this difference in the novel because of how it resonates with Columbine and other school shootings, that is, for what it tells us about the wishes of alienated young men for some kind of celebrity to give meaning to their lives, even if that celebrity has to occur at the moment of self-inflicted death. This particularly male version of the celebrity fantasy, tied as it is with death, takes to absurd extremes the simultaneous longing for specialness and awareness of the impossibility of achieving it (in life) that marks a narcissistic culture intolerant of the ordinary (Stein, 2000). And with regard to that impossibility, the novel makes far more clear than the film the narcissistic oscillation between grandiosity and self-deprecation – for example, Marla and the narrator constantly refer to themselves as human butt-wipe and both long for death as release from the meaninglessness of life. Nonetheless, in film and novel a longing for something that would make life meaningful is present throughout. The solutions are disastrous; the expression of the longing is what is radical about both novel and film.

⁵ Interestingly, the novel ends differently and does not suggest such an integration. The novel ends when the narrator repudiates Tyler and acknowledges he likes Marla, at which point Marla and the people from the support groups come after the narrator to rescue him. In the novel, the buildings don't blow up - because the narrator (as Tyler) used paraffin, knowing full well that paraffin impedes the explosion. Furthermore, the buildings that are being blown up are not the centers of finance but national museums that symbolize the dead white fathers.

⁶ When Marla re-enters the narrative as Tyler's fuck buddy, the narrator is enraged that she's come between him and Tyler. In the novel, he says: 'Long story short. Now Marla's out to ruin another part of my life. Ever since college, I make friends. They get married. I lose friends' (62).

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