

# *Fight for Nothing: Fight Club and Nihilism in Capitalist Society*

GEORGIOS KARAKASIS

University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)

JONATHAN LAVILLA DE LERA<sup>[1]</sup>

University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)

**ABSTRACT.** Karakasis Georgios, Lavilla Jonathan, *Fight for Nothing: Fight Club and Nihilism in Capitalist Society*. "Images" vol. XXXI, no. 40. Poznań 2022. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. Pp. 149–160. ISSN 1731-450X. DOI 10.14746/i.2022.40.09.

This paper analyses the movie *Fight Club* (1999) from the philosophical point of view. We reflect on the split personality of the protagonist, showing how the former represents the subject of the modern society, who, unable to find completion in ceaseless consumerism, embarks upon a personal journey towards the annihilation of every value of his world. This process of annihilation, which at first takes the form of a closed group of people, evolves into an expansive way of annihilation. The latter symbolizes modern society's evolved subject's will to destroy the foundations of capitalist society.

**KEYWORDS:** *Fight club*, film, consumerism, nihilism

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to offer a Schellingian<sup>[2]</sup> philosophical analysis of the movie *Fight Club* (1999),<sup>[3]</sup> focusing on the issues of capitalism, consumerism and the protagonists' acceptance of a radical nihilism in order to confront- and annihilate- modern society's capitalist and consumerist spirit.<sup>[4]</sup> Our paper has three parts, each one constituting a step further into what nihilism is in modern society and, in addition, how this nihilism, having reached the peak (or bottom) of the subject's self-illumination, ultimately has no other way than to break out and become an ideological claim, a rallying cry for the annihilation of the roots and pillars of modern society. The *Fight Club* matures violently as to spawn a nihilist project, *Project Mayhem*.

In the first part, we will consider the reasons and the conditions which led the protagonist, Jack<sup>[5]</sup> (Edward Norton), to his magnificent split personality, when he becomes Tyler (Brad Pitt), the unconscious<sup>[6]</sup> drive towards the

longing for breaking every social and personal bond. Tyler is more than an unconscious will finding its way out to the surface: he is the will

[1] This paper has been supported by AKTIBA-IT (IT1762-22), a research group of the University of the Basque Country and funded by the Basque Government.

[2] Even though our interpretation of *Fight Club* is based on Friedrich Schelling's philosophy and his concept of what the human being is, there is no doubt that the film can also be interpreted from many different philosophical/cultural perspectives, given the great variety of topics it features. For a postmodern Deleuzian analysis of the film, see W. Brown, D.H. Fleming, *Deterritorialisation and Schizoanalysis in David Fincher's Fight Club*, "Deleuze Studies" 2011, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 275–299; and K. Greenwood, "You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake": *Fighting and Ideology in Fight Club*, "M/C Journal" 2003, vol. 6, no. 1. For a Marxist analysis, see A. Kornbluh, *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club*, London 2019.

which comes to know itself as such, as willing itself and not tolerating any restrictions.

In the second part, we will see how the protagonist, and his doppelganger, represent the individual in modern society, who has

[3] The film is based on the homonymous novel by Chuck Palahniuk written in 1996. A very thorough analysis of Palahniuk's work can be found in the second issue of volume 2 of the *Stirrings Still* journal. More specifically, see J. Kavadlo, *The Fiction of Self-destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralists*, "Stirrings Still" 2005, vol. 2 no. 2, pp. 3–24; J.A. Sartain, „*Even the Mona Lisa's Falling Apart*": *The Cultural Assimilation of Scientific Epistemologies in Palahniuk's Fiction*, "Stirrings Still" 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 25–47; P. Kennet, *Fight Club and the Dangers of Oedipal Obsession*, "Stirrings Still" 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 48–64; R. Bennet, *The Death of Sisyphus: Existentialist Literature and the Cultural Logic of Chuck Palahniuk's „Fight Club*", "Stirrings Still" 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 65–80; P. Mathews, *Diagnosing Chuck Palahniuk's „Fight Club*", "Stirrings Still" 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 81–104; A. Casado da Rocha, *Disease and Community in Chuck Palahniuk's Early Fiction*, "Stirrings Still" 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 105–115; A. Hock Soon Ng, *Muscular Existentialism in Chuck Palahniuk's „Fight Club*", "Stirrings Still" 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 116–138; and C. Kerr, *A Review of „Haunted*", "Stirrings Still" 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 139–142.

[4] For a philosophical analysis of the movie, covering a variety of issues, such as gender/masculinity and morality, see Th. Wartenberg (ed.), *Fight Club*, London 2012; and F. Collado-Rodríguez, *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke*, New Jersey 2013.

[5] Even though the narrator's name is never clearly said in the movie, he still sometimes calls himself Jack, a name taken from a scene where the protagonist reads a *Readers Digest* article about the human body.

[6] For Schelling's contribution to the understanding of the unconscious in philosophy, psychology and psychoanalysis, see S.J. McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit*, London 2012; T. Fennichel, *Schelling, Freud, and the Philosophical Foundations of Psychoanalysis*, London 2018; and G. Barentsen, *Romantic Metasubjectivity Through Schelling and Jung: Rethinking the Romantic Subject*, London 2020.

accepted the personal challenge of nihilating every meaning that society and the institutions have tried to impose upon him. His total nihilistic rejection of every meaning and purpose that this life may have occurs through the cleansing and liberating use of violence – violence directed against one's own self and being. Seen in the light of Schelling's philosophy,[7] the individual is in the state of ceaseless contraction, aiming to safeguard his own will by casting away and dismissing every possible constraint that society and the moral values system would try to enchain him with.

In the last part, the contraction becomes a violent nihilistic expansion. *Fight Club* is transformed into *Project Mayhem* and what was a purely personal existential struggle becomes a devastating overwhelming unleashing of nihilism; the absolute rejection of the world expressed no longer as a personal way of life or conviction but as a totally political act of willing the annihilation of every norm and structure, of willing *nothing*.

### Jack Unbound: the will to break free

The life of *Fight Club's* protagonist has been well described by Diken and Lausten:[8] he is mobile in the mobile network society. Jack has a well-paid work which compels him to travel; he fully participates in consumerism, which is clearly symbolized by his care for decorating his house with new products advertised in the Ikea catalogue; he can *decorate* his home and his life as he wishes. Being creative, being unique, in fact, is no longer opposed to the system, but to what capitalism promotes: previous societies of disciplines have become societies of control,[9] and there is no more a panoptic which prohibits doing this or that, but a big market where it is possible to buy every kind of *perversion*. Stated diversely, it could be claimed with Foucault that the century has *become Deleuzian*.<sup>[10]</sup> To be *creative*, to find *lines of flight* is not any more to fight against society, but to engage the mobile network society. So, Jack identifies himself with the constantly renewed furniture and household items.

However, this process of constantly renewing his domestic furnishings, this process of completing himself, does not guarantee him a solid identity. Jack advances in accordance with the continuous progress of capitalism, but in that process, he does not manage to feel complete. Jack does not have the feeling of being well-rooted and part of something, but rather an anonymous passenger of a train in motion, from which he cannot get off. He is mobile and flexible, ready to travel, to constantly renew his life according to society's progress and to adapt himself to his boss' requests. We could claim that Jack is in progress, like the mobile society, up to the point that he is nothing else than that renewing process. In fact, Jack's duality is produced by this situation. He can buy whatever he longs for on the train in motion where he is, but he cannot get off that train. He cannot stop being mobile and flexible. He cannot stop desiring the stuff sold on the train. His frustration derives from that situation, as a desire to abandon the locomotive and put down roots, to feel part of something. Tyler is nothing more than the call of Jack's stomach, the call that compels him to stop the consumerist flux in which he is imprisoned, as he does not really feel alive. To become free consists in fighting for stopping the motion that leads him forwards.

Jack's problem is not an individual one, that is to say, it is not psychological, but political. Continuous mobility produces vertigo, a kind of dissatisfaction with our lives, as if they were not ours. There is a discontent with society, which, even if led to be original, does not manage to find an identity for itself, apart from the continuous flux that pushes it forward. Global mobility propels us forward and we also carry this mobility itself forward, with no solid identity nor a group with which we feel identified. To solve the many potential dangers this kind of disaffection could produce, the train is well equipped with an escape mechanism to release the malaise: pills (also those against insomnia, which Jack's doctor refuses to prescribe for him), gyms, pubs, nightlife, self-help groups, and so on. The mobile society supplies individuals

with a varied range of escape mechanisms with which they can purge their discontent, as if they were mere psychic problems and not political ones. Jack's insomnia problems compel him to go to the physician, and even if he does not want to give pills to Jack, he supplies him with the key for a kind of catharsis: Jack starts joining some self-help groups, in which patients of several specific serious diseases gather together to share their grief. Although he joins them as a *tourist*, sharing his pain with other people functions as an escape valve; he manages to sleep again, i.e. he manages to get rid of his crazy desire to change his life.

This change in his life seems to solve his problems. The longing for being different disappears and he finds a way to sleep. Nevertheless, this remedy is not long-lasting in Jack's case. Marla (Helena Bonham Carter), another *tourist* in self-help groups, enters the scene. Her presence disturbs Jack. He is no longer able to purge his frustration in those groups due to Marla's presence. Marla's character not only

[7] Our analysis of the individual's contraction, and its later evolution into an expansive reaction, is directly influenced by the following work: F. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, New York 2006; nonetheless, our goal is not to provide a detailed interpretation of Schelling's work but, using some basic concepts of it, depict the modern individual in their unceasing struggle between the contraction and expansion taking place inside it. For a more detailed account of Schelling's *Freedom Essay*, see the following works: M. Heidegger, *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of the Human Freedom*, Ohio 1985; B. Freydberg, *Schelling's Dialogical Freedom Essay*, New York 2008; M. Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, Oxford 2012; and D. Vanden Auweele, *Kant and Schelling on the Ground of Evil*, "International Journal for Philosophy of Religion" 2019, vol. 85, no. 2, pp. 235–253.

[8] B. Diken, C.B. Lausten, *Enjoy Your Fight! Fight Club as a Symptom of the Network Society*, "Cultural Values" 2002, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 349–367.

[9] Cf. B. Diken, C.B. Lausten, op.cit.

[10] M. Foucault, *Theatrum Philosophicum*, "Critique" 1970, vol. 26, no. 282, p. 885.

reveals to Jack that his problems are not merely his own, but it also shows that Jack's medicine is a mere temporary arrangement. The catharsis of the groups does not solve the identity problem produced by the network society. Jack is not the one he would like to be, and he does not feel free. The train keeps moving and the programmed lines of flight do not drown his sorrows. Jack's insomnia reappears and Tyler emerges as the change he needs in his life in a completely different way, i.e. in a radical way.

After approximately one hour and 45 minutes of the film, one of the key moments in the plot is disclosed: Jack and Tyler are *the same person*. Tyler is the one who clearly explains what is going on. Jack was looking for a change in his life, but he was not able to do so on his own. Tyler is Jack's repressed longing for change; Tyler is that *other* who Jack would like to be, although he doesn't dare to directly go for it. Jack's identity is split into being the one he actually is and the other he would like to be but doesn't manage to be. Tyler is the latter, when the repressed self breaks into the domain of the former. Tyler is Jack when the latter loses consciousness, which is to say, he is the repressed self when released. In fact, Tyler claims to be *free*. In the following lines, we try to set out how this claim must be understood politically, and not just as a psychological and individual matter. To do so, we have to consider what it means to be free and which is the way of life Jack wants to finish off.

To start with, the protagonist does not feel free: so, we should consider what compels him to remain working for the continuous progress that urges us to go forward. To a large extent, we could state that Jack is afraid of losing the train and the *mild* comfort it guarantees. The same life he hates and would like to change, i.e. that life of consumerism identified with the objects that decorate his home, makes him a prisoner. That is why the radical process of change presented by Tyler begins with the explosion in his condo. It is only after Jack has lost forever what kept him firmly fastened to the train of mobility that the process of change may commence. To

become free, that is to say, to become Tyler, the one Jack would like to be, means getting rid of the mobility flux that compels him to develop his routine. Blowing up his condo is the first and necessary move to fight against Jack. In order to change his life, first he must be brave enough to lose the many facilities and pleasures supplied by consumer society. Once the condo for which he works and where he lives is destroyed, he embarks upon the real change, which is entirely different from a temporary arrangement.

Hence, to start changing his life means disconnecting himself from the network society. The first thing to combat with is the fear of being disconnected; that implies losing the facilities supplied by the connection, the mild pleasures that filled his previous life. To get rid of his condo is as painful as necessary; after having lost it, Jack will no longer be dependent on it. By means of that painful experience, Jack conquers his freedom. He may have let behind his previous facilities, but gradually he will understand that he had been a prisoner to them. The necessary step of choosing that change is related to learning not to be afraid of experiencing pain. Only one who is able to turn down several kinds of catharsis offered by the system – pills, self-help groups, the pleasure of purchasing – and to direct his discontent to the fight against that way of life we hate, will be able to gain freedom. To fight against oneself means not just to feel pain and, thus, to realize that we are alive, but also to start grasping freedom, since we are no longer afraid of suffering physical pain. Fighting is not solely a symbol of change, but something more; the necessary means to become free.

### **The nihilist contractions of modern society's subject**

So far, we have seen how the true feeling of pain has become the quintessential factor for Jack's decision to split into two, Tyler being the other part, and to struggle to free himself from every constraint, his former life not excluded. In this part, we will take a closer look at the

way the protagonist, as the subject of the modern society, and having realized the personality split into his symbolic and ontic representation, even though the lines between them are very blurry, if existent at all, is contracting his core to a nihilistic philosophy striving to protect and safeguard his self from every possible external/social influence. In this process, in this ceaseless *sliding*, a term used many times in the movie, the individual manages to avoid every possible friction that society and modern lifestyles could cause him. In this first stage, everything is pure negation for the sake of negation; negation and the philosophy of nihilism are not set forth as a solution or as a necessity to change the world, but, on the contrary, as the conscious decision of a protagonist finding himself in an endless activity of contraction, of dismissing every external force during his own self (un)making. The basic elements/events that characterize our protagonist during this first phase are the rejection of every hope and the violence as a purifying act and as means of destroying every single bond that modern society seeks to tie the individual with, the oppression of the master not excluded. "And then something happened. I let go... Lost in oblivion. Dark and silent and complete. I found freedom. Losing all hope was freedom." This realization, this revelation which took place when the protagonist was in the comforting hug of Robert Paulsen (Meat Loaf), a former bodybuilder who had had his testicles removed due to a testicular cancer provoked by the excessive use of steroids, is one the most important moments in the movie; it is the beginning of a life without hope, without an optimistic belief that everything happens as it happens because of a reason. The new world unconcealed in the eyes of the protagonist is a world where order and system are only imposed elements and not even remotely the constitutive elements of the world as we know it. This decisive act of casting doubt on the main structure of reality and the way the latter is to be perceived, analysed and lived by us, was hinted to us in a thought-provoking extract by Friedrich Schelling:

After the eternal act of self-revelation, everything in the world is, as we see it now, rule, order and form; but anarchy still lies in the ground, as if it could break through once again, and nowhere does it appear as if order and form were what is original but rather as if initial anarchy had been brought to order. This is the incomprehensible base of reality in | things, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding but rather remains eternally in the ground. The understanding is born in the genuine sense from that which is without understanding. Without this preceding darkness creatures have no reality; darkness is their necessary inheritance.[11]

This struggle between order and chaos, between our need to live our lives in a structured and well-organized way and our desire to live unconstrained by social norms and roles[12] is depicted in a dialogue between the protagonist (Edward Norton), whose name is never mentioned in the movie, and his symbolically represented alter ego, Tyler Durden, after the former's condo has been utterly destroyed as a consequence of a bombing. The former, having gone to a bar with his alter ego, and in a state of despair after the loss of all his material possessions in the flames, claims the following:

when you buy furniture, you tell yourself, that's it. That's the last sofa I'll need. Whatever happens, that sofa problem is handled. 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*)

In his mourning, the protagonist, an individual from modern society, is grieving for the loss

[11] F. Schelling, op.cit., p. 29.

[12] Žižek highlights the extremely fragile stability of the world we live in in his comment in that: "the status of our 'spiritual' universe is thus far more fragile than it may appear: the natural environment within which our civilization can thrive is the product of a radically contingent set of circumstances, so that at any moment, owing to the unforeseen consequences of man's industrial activity or to its own unforeseeable logic, nature can 'run amok' and go off the rails" (S. Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: an Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, London 2007, p. 74).

of everything that was supposed to offer him his completion. He was close to being complete, even though this seeming nearness would never lead him to what he considered completion. The belief that material possessions, the "IKEA" way of life, could eventually make us happy too, and give meaning to our lives in the modern society is crushed by Tyler Durden's reply to this "existential wannabe" crisis for the protagonist:

Right. 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. Rogaine. Viagra. Olestra [...]. I say never be complete. I say stop being perfect. I say let's evolve. Let the chips fall where they may. (*Fight Club*)

In this answer, we find the open declaration of war against every idea, belief and material possession that should be meaningful in our lives. The protagonist's mourning for the loss of his "completion" is now taken apart by his alter ego as mere senseless whining for a dream that could never offer the meaning and the happiness that he sought so much. The interesting thing here is that his proposal is not about establishing greater ideas and values nor, of course, empathy towards people that are suffering and dying. What is set forth is a different approach towards what life is, a nihilistic annihilation of both consumerism and the empathy-focused spirit of our society and world; there is no mourning for the loss of material possessions, not even mourning for the loss of human lives. Our life is not perfect, nor will it ever be. There is no hope in this life; our greatest evolution is the comprehending and accepting of this daunting liberating fate; "let the chips fall where they may," or in other words, let the order collapse in the chaos it originally sprang from. Mourning for a loss is presented as the feeling of pain and frustration because our plan; our life did not go the way we wanted it to go. Nevertheless, the question/affirmation presented here is whether there is a plan, a pathway from which we seek to get away. If there is no order in the world, there is no plan, and if there is no plan, there is no loss,

only the dominance of contingency, the chaos of possibilities and their actualization. The only thing that matters is the "ever-sliding," the unstoppable contraction of the subject to himself, a contraction which nihilates the importance of every external factor, be it value, idea or belief, and keeps contracting while in the process of his world excluding/erasing self-contemplation.

Of course, the contraction of the subject into himself is not a mere process of thought, a decision to step away from the world and live as a hermit. On the contrary, the contraction needs the image of the world, of its potential expansion, so as to reaffirm itself as the nihilistic opposite of the latter. Since the image of modern society and of the modern world led to the awakening of the protagonist's desire to contract himself, there can be no exclusion nor escaping from the world. The world, however, is now projected as the enemy of the I, the dangerous and corrupting Not-I. The world-denying subject emerges from the world first as a contracting activity for the sake of personal safeguarding in the non-belonging to the world, and then, as we will see in the next chapter, as an expanding will for *nothing*.

The process of contracting cannot and should not be seen as a mere thinking activity of denial. It materializes immediately by showing us the event/activity which is going to dominate and control the subject from now; this activity is violence. The movie emphasizes the importance of associating both nihilistic thought and its main activity, namely violence, by immediately connecting the scenes in which they appear. While the aforementioned conversation in the bar introduced us to the acceptance of the non-perfection of the world as our evolution, right after getting out of the bar Tyler asks as a favor of the protagonist, which is to hit him. He explains that he has never been into a fight and that he wanted to feel what it is to be hit. Tyler, of course, as we have already said, is the symbolic representation of the protagonist and he beautifully depicts the subject of modern society who has decided to nullify the world and is now in need to start acting against this nulli-

fication. After some hesitation, the protagonist finally hits Tyler, thus, his own self. Violence and fighting appear as the way in which the subject will shut himself out of the world. His denying the world comes as the denial of the safety of the subject. If the subject/actor really wants to be able to live in this world without order, he must also take away the fear of pain in all its forms. By hitting himself, the protagonist has managed to materialize his own rebuff of the world, since he is no longer afraid of any kind of violence that the world may unleash against him. By hitting himself, he becomes the master of his own violence and no longer sees himself as a slave to his fear, to the possible failure of his plans and to his life. This is a crucial moment in the movie, because when the protagonist is fighting against Tyler, against his own self, people are coming out of the bar and what they see is a guy hitting himself. At first, they laugh but they stay to watch the event, and after some time more and more people gather to unleash their violent activity one against another. Soon, because of the number of people interested in this Club, they move to the cellar of the bar, where the founder of the Club, the symbolic representation of the protagonist, Tyler, sets out the rules of 'Fight Club.'

This leads to the foundation of 'Fight Club.' The establishment of this club is not to be understood as a kind of invention, of something that had not been thought before. On the contrary, it is the materialization of the violent potentiality of a generation that wants to break its chains, break away from society, but did not know the way to do so. The club was something of a revelation, the enlightening of a subject who has finally found the way to contract himself away from the society, away from the world and away from what he used to be up until that moment. Commenting on the creation of 'Fight Club,' the protagonist says: "It was right in everyone's face. Tyler and I just made it visible. It was on the tip of everyone's tongue. Tyler and I just gave it a name."

The emergence of the Club paved the way, as we have seen, for the more intense contraction of the modern subject to itself. Its main

goal is neither to expand nor to attract people or become something more than it is: a (self) denying violent activity. This is the reason why "the first rule of Fight Club is that you do not talk about Fight Club. And the second rule is that you do not talk about Fight Club!" Of course, more and more people would come and join the Club, but the message and the core of the Club never change; it is not supposed to become a movement, an ideology or a trend. It serves only as the means for the endless contraction of the individual, and as the site where violence and pain could be lived, enjoyed and appreciated as such; in other words, true denial through true violence. The denial is two-fold: contemplative denial of modern society along with all its components and ontic denial of being chained to any kind of social restrictions/chains by the voluntarily unleashing of violence against his own fear of getting hurt in the world. Violence and pain are not only means through which the body and the self can be elevated to something higher and transcendental. Violence and pain are the self and everything that the self can be. The body is not trained through fighting; it becomes the receiver of pain and violence, the recipient of the only possible meaning of what this world can signify. Pain is lived and enjoyed, and this is why ontic violence is of such importance. This point of view is highlighted when the protagonist and Tyler are on the bus and see some advertising posters of underwear from a famous company and comment on this:

**Narrator (Edward Norton):** I felt sorry for guys packed into gyms trying to look like how Calvin Klein or Tommy Hilfiger said they should. Is that what a man looks like?

**Tyler:** Oh, self-improvement is masturbation. Now, self-destruction... (*Fight Club*)

For the nihilist becoming protagonist, training just to have a stronger and more beautiful body is equal to masturbation, to a mere act of self-pleasure. Self-destruction is what really matters, because self-destruction is seen as such by the criteria imposed by the society and its norms and habits. A body which enjoys the feeling of pain could never be perceived as

something positive and good in modern society, while, on the other hand, a trained body as a beautiful expression of health and power is not only approved but also promoted and viewed as an objective. Against this perception of the body, *Fight Club* promotes self-destructive tendencies to owning a body which has integrated violence into its everyday life. Violence is his life and the moments of not experiencing it constitute a short break from reality. For the protagonist, violence is more than a tool; it is a liberating and purifying act which kills society-imposed ethical norms and brings life forth as the joy in feeling pain, and violence as beauty. Every bond that the protagonist breaks in his life is a liberating act baptized in blood and self-destruction. Life can only have its meaning as an endless game with the individual's possibility of annihilating his own existence. Quoting Tyler before getting hit for the first time: "You can't know yourself if you haven't! [been in a fight]. I don't wanna die without any scars!"

In this first phase of the contracting individual, violence serves two major roles: to deprive the subject of its fear of getting hurt and to liberate him from any master that could control him using any kind of violence, psychological or corporal. In a nutshell, the subject can only nullify the world if every fear or sense of order and system are nullified in his vision of the world. In the first case, regarding the personal struggle against pain and fear, we have to mention one of the most striking scenes in the movie, when Tyler forces the protagonist to face his own fear of pain by chemically burning his hand. The prelude to this burning and what is said during this extremely violent act is of crucial importance, if not the quintessence of the whole movie; that is why we deem it appropriate to let the character, Tyler, speak on his own:

People found clothes got cleaner when washed at a certain point in the river... Human sacrifices were once made on the hills above this river. Bodies burnt. Water permeated the ashes to create lye. This is lye. The crucial ingredient. Once it mixed with the melted body fat, a white soapy discharge crept into the river. (*Fight Club*)

Right after this, Tyler tightly grasps the hand of the protagonist and spills lye on it. The protagonist is driven to extreme suffering, whereas Tyler's words are not words of consolation but a prelude to the ultimate evolution of the protagonist in his most nihilistic form. The speech goes as follows:

Don't shut the pain out. The first soap was made from heroes' ashes, like the first monkey shot into space. Without pain or sacrifice, we would have nothing. This is your pain, this is your burning hand... You're feeling premature enlightenment. It's the greatest moment of your life... 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 can happen. We don't need Him Fuck damnation, fuck redemption. We are God's unwanted children? So be it! First, you have to give up. First, you have to know, not fear, know that some day, you're gonna die. It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything. (*Fight Club*)

After the end of this ritual, Tyler says: "Congratulations. You're one step closer to hitting the bottom." This is our protagonist's baptism of fire; killing his own fear, and rebirth in the joy of pain and fight. By hitting the "bottom," the protagonist reaches the highest peaks of his own being in violence and being as violence. When violence and blood become what defines one person, then no fear can exist, because the effects of violence no longer hold the terrifying upshots that most people would attribute to it. Making violence and pain a part of his own being, or to put it more accurately, his entire own being, the protagonist can no longer be tied to any social, moral or religion bonds. This is clearly and explicitly depicted in rejecting the authority of fathers and of God; no salvation is needed, no redemption, since pain, violence and *nihil* have reshaped the new unfettered individual. The acceptance of *nihil* comes hand in hand with the acceptance of the chaotic nature of our own existence. The subject symbolically resurrects as the creation of chaos and of despair; despair not because of his having reached



absolute pessimism, but, on the contrary, as the repudiation of the meaning of hope itself. No hope, no redemption, no salvation; only pain, chaos and nothingness.

Once this personal, bloodied rebirth has taken place, once the subject has spurned every authority of master, be it father or God, the concept of the master *per se*, at least for the subject, is no longer existent as such. The rejection of the master is brilliantly depicted mainly in two scenes: in the cellar of the bar, when the owner of the bar, Lou, unaware of the fact that it was the basement of the Fight Club, asks everyone to leave, and the second one when the narrator hits himself in front of his boss proving to him that the latter no more holds any power over him and that the new rules are no longer set by the master but by the new-born chaotic, nihilistic subject.<sup>[13]</sup> Even though the two scenes are remarkably accurate, when describing the “dethronement” of the master, the one in the bar basement makes us understand that our subject, in this case Tyler, is not only immune to any kind of violence but also becomes the master of violence in both its psychological and physical form. When Tyler refuses to vacate the bar basement, Lou, by means of an armed bodyguard standing behind him, starts hitting him. Instead of fighting back or trying to defend himself, Tyler starts laughing and poking Lou. Each punch from Lou provokes a kind of lunatic laughter, which intimidates the puncher, while at the same time humiliating him as being incapable of mastering his own violence.

The violence of the master does not fear nor submission; the master can no longer use violence effectively and we see that the king is naked. The master is no longer a master if the threat and the execution of violence could provoke fear anymore. This is majestically understood when the bloodied Tyler throws Lou on the floor and while laughing/spitting blood on his terrorized face, he screams at him: “You don’t know where I’ve been, Lou!” This is the final act, the indisputable proof that there is a new master, much stronger than the former one. Tyler, and the narrator, have gone off on

a journey to the bottom of the nihilistic core of their philosophy. They have decided to do so using violence against their own selves and becoming masters of it. Tyler does not have to hit Lou; he has already outpowered him by showing that what made Lou the master for so long, namely, the use of violence and fear, goes to waste when used against a subject who has seen nothingness and the death of every meaning. From now on, there is a new master, who is almost invincible; his invincibility does not lie in his lack of fear of violence, but in the redefinition of his own being as birth of chaos and nothingness; a redefinition of what violence is and of what its meaning and purpose will be hereafter.

### **Willing *nothing*: from Fight Club to Project Mayhem**

So far, we have seen our subject, the narrator and Tyler, in his contraction, his safeguarding his recently formed nihilistic core of any possible enchainment/influence from the world, be it moral value, religion, capitalism and any other sort of philosophy or ideology. Nevertheless, the phase of contraction is always in a state of interplay with what it tries to keep out, namely the world. The world is the enemy, of course, but is still the crucial factor for nihilism to be able to define itself. While contracting, the subject is making a careful retreat from the world so as to maintain pure and untouched its core. The first two rules of Fight Club were: “We do not talk about Fight Club.” Fight Club, however, had been gaining more and more renown because people were becoming interested in it. As the two rules dictate, however, the goal is not to expand like a phenomenon, philosophy or ideology; Fight Club is a way of life,

[13] Žižek interprets this scene as the emergence of a pure subject rising from the subject’s total self-degradation when he gets deprived of every practical and symbolic significance attributed to him, losing, thus, even the minimum level of his dignity. Cf. S. Žižek, *El club de la lucha: ¿verdadera o falsa transgresión?*, “Archipiélago” 2002, vol. 53, pp. 47–51.

a disavowal of the world through violence and the forming of a new subject. Nevertheless, the contraction could not ceaselessly continue its retreat from the world. Finally, it changes the guideline, it becomes a violent expansion and a will to annihilate the enemy – not just keep him at a distance. In other words, the subject now wills *nothing*.

One day, Tyler starts giving assignments, “homework” for the members of Fight Club. Spike traps are set on the streets, computer and video stores are vandalized, cars and antennas are destroyed and flight safety instructions cards in airplanes are replaced with ones showing people screaming and in state of agony and fear, among other things. Every single assignment aims at humiliating the spirit of modern capitalist consumer society and hits hard at its pillars, namely the feeling of safety, order and the well-being of each citizen in general. Furthermore, what started as “homework” becomes a mechanism for recruiting members for the new Fight Club, titled *Project Mayhem*. The narrator wakes up one day and finds in front of his door one member of Fight Club standing in a military posture. Tyler informs the narrator that if he manages to stay there for three days without food or shelter, only then will he be accepted into the house.

When this first member is finally accepted, Tyler asks him whether he has brought with him two black shirts, two pairs of black pants, one pair of black boots and black socks, one black jacket and 300\$ personal burial money. This explicit expression of the spirit of army discipline and hierarchy makes us understand that even Chaos needs its Order in order to make nothingness its reality. While the spirit of Fight Club was one of rejecting chains and moral/social impositions, the club of a fraternity now becomes something bigger, something more disciplined, a vast nihilistic expansion. As more and more members are recruited, all wearing black clothes and shaving their heads, the rules of the new-born *Project Mayhem* change as well. The first rule is that “you don’t ask questions

about *Project Mayhem*” and the second one “you don’t ask questions about *Project Mayhem*!”

The subject who, during the existence of Fight Club, was in a state of endless contraction, now realizes that the nihilistic expansion will not happen if there is no order. Thus, order is what gets imposed on the members, very strict and brutal order, which homogenizes them in their becoming aware that no difference is to be accepted or tolerated in *Project Mayhem*. The most frightening proof of this evolution of Fight Club into *Project Mayhem* takes place when one member of the *Project*, and a good friend of the narrator, Robert Paulson, gets shot in the head by the police during a combined assault against an artistic monument and a franchise coffee bar. The dead body lies at the centre of the *Project Mayhem* house and as all the members gather around him, an intense conversation takes place between the shocked narrator and some of the *Project*’s members. When one of the members proposes to bury the body so as to get rid of every possible piece of evidence, the narrator reacts emotionally, saying that the dead deserves respect. A member counterargues that he was killed while serving *Project Mayhem* and when the narrator calls him by his name, another member scared asserts that in *Project Mayhem* people have no names. The narrator insists on saying that he did have a name, i.e. Robert Paulson, making an “enlightened” member reach the ground-breaking deduction, abundant in symbols and significance, that “in death, a member of *Project Mayhem*, has a name.” In *Project Mayhem* you become a person after you die; the name is necessary to prove that the project is real and that it acts in a real and ontically actual way. But as long as a member is alive, he is no longer a free person, since he has voluntarily evolved into the ontic expression of the nihilistic expansion of the chaotic subject. *Project Mayhem* is without any doubt the incarnation of Chaos; but Order becomes its strongest weapon.

So far, we have seen the chaotic and destructive nature of *Project Mayhem*; but ac-

ording to which plan can this happen? To quote the narrator: "the plan is to blow up the headquarters of these credit card companies and the TRW building. If you erase the debt record, then we all go back to zero. You'll create total chaos."

The most interesting part is the way this destruction will happen. In order to blow up the buildings, nitroglycerine is going to be used, and the this is going to be produced through soap, which will be made from human fat. The process is explained in detail by Tyler while he and the narrator are scavenging the garbage of a liposuction clinic.

Tonight... we make soap. To make soap, first we render fat. The salt balance has to be just right so the best fat for soap comes from humans... A liposuction clinic. Richest, creamiest fat in the world. Fat of the land! [...] As the fat renders, the tallow float to the surface. Once the tallow hardens, you skim off a layer of glycerin. Add nitric acid, you've got nitroglycerin. Then add sodium nitrate and sawdust, you've got dynamite. Yeah, with enough soap, one could blow up just about anything. (*Fight Club*)

In this brilliantly vivid description/critique of modern capitalism and of the consumerist obsession which has also rendered aesthetic beauty a product to be bought/sold and manipulated, we can clearly see the real power of *Project Mayhem*: the desperate struggle of the citizen of modern society to find his completion, or a distorted version of it, in literally every aspect of his life. Work, beauty, social relationships, everything is affected/infected by modern's society obsession with perfection and progress. In this extremely smart analogy, as long as rich people, though not exclusively, try to make themselves perfect through surgeries and fat-reducing procedures, the fat they waste becomes dynamite for the pillars of a society which has made them obsessed with artificial beauty and the quest for perfection. More fat means more dynamite, more dynamite means more destruction thanks to the material that the extravagant modern society's perfection obsessed members so generously give away. *Pro-*

*ject Mayhem's* chaos is not a spiritual revolution, nor a ground-breaking invention; it simply is the most extreme face of the most extreme reaction provoked by the most extreme artificiality of modern society. When everything seems to be so holistically superficial, *Project Mayhem* tries to bomb its way into the core of it all.

### The grand finale

In the last scenes of the movie, we witness the narrator's self-awareness along with his recognizing that since the first moment his own violent, radical and revolutionary symbolic representation, Tyler Durden has been capable of many bloody deeds. The narrator realizes that the only way to end this split is by ending his own life. Tyler is more than a single split; Tyler is the narrator's pure violent longing to reject the world. The subject violently wishes to have his own way and set himself free from every chain or every obstacle the world puts in his way. Nevertheless, this will, being so closely tied to its greatest enemy, the world, finds once again, through Tyler, its way out as a pure ontic nihilism. Destruction and mayhem represent the act of a blind will finding its vision; this is a vision, though, which is desperately seeking annihilation and the darkness it used to live in. The will no longer desires to be blind; it only wants to see *nothing*.

This nothingness becomes materialized in the final scene of the movie. The narrator, having survived his own attempt to kill himself and Tyler, remains alive. Despite having a bullet put through his head, grasping hands with Marla, he witnesses his plan, *Project Mayhem's* plan of destroying the credit card companies' buildings, become reality. The narrator decides to wake up late enough to prevent himself from undoing his own will. The destruction we are all witnesses to when the buildings collapse is the proof that his will remained unbound till the very end. Since the very beginning, the narrator seems to have already decided who he was going to be; at the end, he just becomes aware of his own decision.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barentsen G., *Romantic Metasubjectivity Through Schelling and Jung: Rethinking the Romantic Subject*, London 2020
- Bennett R., *The Death of Sisyphus: Existentialist Literature and the Cultural Logic of Chuck Palahniuk's „Fight Club“*, „Stirrings Still” 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 65–80
- Brown W., Fleming D.H., *Deterritorialisation and Schizoanalysis in David Fincher's Fight Club*, „Deleuze Studies” 2011, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 275–299
- Casado da Rocha A., *Disease and Community in Chuck Palahniuk's Early Fiction*, „Stirrings Still” 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 105–115
- Collado-Rodríguez F., *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, In-visible Monsters, Choke*, New Jersey 2013
- Diken B., Lausten C.B., *Enjoy Your Fight! Fight Club as a Symptom of the Network Society*, „Cultural Values” 2002, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 349–367, DOI 10.1080/1362517022000047307
- Fenichel T., *Schelling, Freud, and the Philosophical Foundations of Psychoanalysis*, London 2018
- Foucault M., *Theatrum Philosophicum*, „Critique” 1970, vol. 26, no. 282, pp. 885–908
- Freydberg B., *Schelling's Dialogical Freedom Essay*, New York 2008
- Greenwood K., „You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake”: *Fighting and Ideology in Fight Club*, „M/C Journal” 2003, vol. 6, no. 1, DOI 10.5204/mcj.2146
- Heidegger M., *Schelling's Treatise on the Essence of the Human Freedom*, Ohio 1985
- Hock Soon Ng A., *Muscular Existentialism in Chuck Palahniuk's „Fight Club“*, „Stirrings Still” 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 116–138
- Kavadlo J., *The Fiction of Self-destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralist*, „Stirrings Still” 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 3–24
- Kennett P., *Fight Club and the Dangers of Oedipal Obsession*, „Stirrings Still” 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 48–64
- Kerr C., *A Review of „Haunted“*, „Stirrings Still” 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 139–142
- Kornbluh H., *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club*, London 2019
- Kosch M., *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, Oxford 2012, DOI 10.1093/0199289115.001.0001
- Mathews P., *Diagnosing Chuck Palahniuk's „Fight Club“*, „Stirrings Still” 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 81–104
- McGrath S.J., *The Dark Ground of Spirit*, London 2012
- Sartain J.A., „Even the Mona Lisa's Falling Apart”: *The Cultural Assimilation of Scientific Epistemologies in Palahniuk's Fiction*, „Stirrings Still” 2005, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 25–47
- Schelling F., *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, New York 2006
- Vanden Auweele D., *Kant and Schelling on the Ground of Evil*, „International Journal for Philosophy of Religion” 2019, vol. 85, no. 2, pp. 235–253, DOI 10.1007/s11153-019-09701-6
- Wartenberg Th. (ed.), *Fight Club*, London 2012
- Žižek S., *El club de la lucha: ¿verdadera o falsa transgresión?* „Archipiélago” 2002, vol. 53, pp. 47–51
- Žižek S., *The Indivisible Remainder: an Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*, London 2007