

## FIGHT CLUB AND THE DELEUZIAN CENTURY

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The opening credits in the film *Fight Club* provide an accurate portrayal of the various forces in conflict in the film. The film begins on the molecular level, traversing the networked structure of the brain, synapses firing and inhibiting. The camera then zooms out a bit, and cuts across the skin: porous and alive, a veritable multiplicity. Finally, it slides up the barrel of a gun: cold steel, smooth and molar, a representative of death. These oppositions—molecular and molar, unity and multiplicity, life and death—are at the core of the film *Fight Club*. In his works, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze offers a unique perspective on these concepts, and thus provides a compelling angle from which one can analyze the film.

“Perhaps, one day, this century will be known as Deleuzian” (Foucault 165). Philosopher and social-theorist Michel Foucault’s words sparked a flurry of controversy when first published in 1970. Deleuze, for his part, maintained modesty when confronted about Foucault’s praise, stating that “his little remark’s a joke meant to make people who like us laugh, and make everyone else livid” (*Negotiations* 4). However, like many jokes, Foucault’s comment contains more than an ounce of truth to it. As I will show, America’s transition into a post-industrial economy renders Deleuze’s theory increasingly relevant. One might propose that Foucault’s statement was correct in spirit; he merely got the century wrong. This, like Foucault’s original remark, is meant half-jokingly, but there is a case to be made. In this paper, I will focus on the film *Fight Club*, which is arguably the quintessential Deleuzian film. I will isolate the various resonances between Deleuze’s theory and the film, and extract from this their significance and implications. Additionally, I will draw upon parallels between *Fight Club* and contemporary society in general to demonstrate the reasons that the latter merits the appellation “the Deleuzian century.”

In a very brief and enigmatic essay entitled “Postscript on Societies of Control,” Gilles Deleuze discusses what he sees as a fundamental transition among the institutions of power. He locates in the work of Michel Foucault an analysis of what he terms “societies of discipline.” According to Foucault, in the Middle Ages there existed “societies of sovereignty,” which were rooted in the monarch and had cruelty as their model of punishment. Replacing these were the societies of discipline, which dealt primarily with

environments of enclosure, such as is seen in the prison, hospital, factory, school, or family (Deleuze, *Negotiations* 177). However, Deleuze writes, “we’re in the midst of a general breakdown of all sites of confinement,” and the “societies of discipline” are in the process of being phased out (178). In their place are what Deleuze terms the “societies of control.” This transition corresponds with the transformation from modern industrial society to a “post-modern information society” (Busk 104), and is seen in the replacement of spaces of enclosure by control mechanisms. Deleuze details the differences between these two institutions:

The various placements or sites of confinement through which individuals pass are independent variables: we’re supposed to start all over again each time, and although all these sites have a common language, it’s analogical. The various forms of control, on the other hand, are inseparable variations, forming a system of varying geometry whose language is *digital* (though not necessarily binary). Confinements are *molds*, different moldings, while controls are a *modulation*. (*Negotiations* 178-79)

In other words, societies of discipline were marked by strict molds that regulated behavior, whereas in control societies there is no set mold and there is instead modulation, or a more amorphous exercise of power immanent to the social body (Hardt and Negri 23-24). The difference between these two societies is shown in the transition from the factory to the corporation, from wages to salaries and bonuses, from prison to house arrest. Everywhere boundaries overlap and stretch, where they were formerly rigid and separate. To further explain, Deleuze draws on an economic example, stating that:

Money, perhaps, best expresses the difference between the two kinds of society, since discipline was always related to molded currencies containing gold as a numerical standard, whereas control is based on floating exchange rates, modulations depending on a code setting sample percentages for various currencies. (*Negotiations* 180)

Thus, control societies are characterized by a lack of a *real* referential, for example, a gold standard. To give just one example of the lack of a real referential in the film, the main character lacks a proper name. This exaggerates the features of a control society in that he is not defined by a strict demarcation, designated by the proper name, but rather by a more diffuse network of signification, such as in his relationship to his job or to his furniture.

At the beginning of *Fight Club*, the viewer is introduced to the protagonist of the film: a 29-year-old disillusioned insurance worker, who by convention is referred to as "Jack." The film is set in a present day control society, with all the characteristics that implies. Jack narrates that for six months, he has been unable to sleep. His description of insomnia presents the first introduction of Deleuzian themes in the film, in that it bears a striking similarity to Deleuze's concept of simulacra. Jack notes that "with insomnia, nothing's real. Everything is far away. Everything is a copy, of a copy, of a copy" (Fincher). The simulacrum is that which, through the repeated act of copying, becomes different *in kind* from the original. More exactly, the simulacrum is a copy that lacks an original, or whose origin lies only in other copies. Disneyworld's "Main Street, USA" is a commonly invoked example: it is a copy of something that never really existed in the first place. In his book *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze traces the history of philosophy—a history which has asserted the primacy of identity over difference and the model over the copy since Plato's *Sophist*. To give a short summary, Deleuze believes that philosophy has had a habit of using essences to define identity. So, for instance, if you ask someone what a human is, they will often reply something like "a rational animal" (Delanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* 9). This is, in Deleuze's view, missing most of the picture. Deleuze believes that identities are mere effects of stronger underlying processes, and that these processes are best described by difference and multiplicities rather than identity and unities. The consequences of this line of thought are tantamount to (and in many ways similar to) Darwin's ideas about the origin of species, because both Darwin's and Deleuze's theories abandon a static and essentialist view of nature for a more dynamic one. Along with the historical disregard for difference in-itself, Deleuze hopes to overturn the privileging of the model over the copy. Thus, he writes:

When the identity of things dissolves, being escapes to attain univocity, and begins to revolve around the different. That which is or returns has no prior constituted identity: things are reduced to the difference which fragments them, and to all the differences which are implicated in it and through which they pass . . . Everything has become simulacrum, for by simulacrum we should not understand a simple imitation but rather the act by which the very idea of a model or privileged position is overturned. (*Difference and Repetition* 67-69)

Deleuze sees the simulacrum as an affirmative source of pure difference. This poses the question of why Jack experiences simulacra negatively, as pathological. The answer is revealed by the manner in which Jack's insomnia is cured. He seeks the help of a physician, who refuses to give him medication, despite his plea that he's in pain. "You want to see pain?" the doctor facetiously inquires, "swing by First Methodist Tuesday night. See the guys with testicular cancer. That's pain." Jack follows his doctor's orders, and inadvertently discovers that the experience cures his insomnia. Crying at his first support-group, Jack narrates: "And then something happened. I let go. Lost in oblivion—dark and silent and complete—I found freedom. Losing all hope was freedom" (Fincher). Hope is an attempt to ground experience in a referential, that is, in something real. Since referential value no longer exists in a control society, or exists only as simulacra, hope is problematic. Jack is thus party to an *ungrounding*. Deleuze writes that "by 'ungrounding' we should understand the freedom of the non-mediated ground" (*Difference and Repetition* 67). When Jack loses all hope, he is revived by the freedom allowed within a free-floating space that lacks a foundation for, more than being a surface, the ground represents a certain relationship with the sky. The problem is that Jack, in effect, grounds his experience of ungrounding in a certain context. He thus becomes addicted, and begins regularly attending support-groups for the terminally-ill as a "tourist," vampirically hosting on the catharsis they provide.

In the film, Jack is portrayed as an active participant in consumer culture. While sitting on the toilet, eyeing an Ikea catalog sideways as if it were a pornographic magazine, Jack muses: "I would flip through catalogs and wonder 'what kind of dining set defines me as a person?'" (Fincher). Here, Jack's subjectification, that is, the way he defines himself as a subject, is dependent upon externals—in this case commercialism or capitalism. For Deleuze and Guattari this is always the case, writing that

subjectification as a regime of signs or a form of expression is tied to an assemblage, in other words, an organization of power that is already fully functioning in the economy, rather than superposing itself upon contents or relations between contents determined as real in the last instance. Capital is a point of subjectification par excellence. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 130)

Despite the fact that subjectification is always defined in relation to some external "assemblage," the film presents Jack's furniture fetish in a mocking tone, populating his apartment with textual blurbs of descriptions and Swedish names as though it were itself an

Ikea catalog. This is the first example of *Fight Club's* critique of subjectification in a capitalist society.

While on a business flight, Jack encounters Tyler Durden, a "single-serving friend." The two men engage in relatively meaningless conversation, and business cards are exchanged. After landing, Jack travels back to his apartment via taxi only to find that flaming remnants of what used to be his furniture and belongings have been scattered across the street and sidewalk, the result of a mysterious explosion. After being turned away by the doorman—"police orders"—Jack goes to the payphone. First he calls Marla, a woman he encountered at his support-groups with whom he has a love-hate relationship. However, he thinks twice and hangs up the phone. On a whim he pulls out Tyler's business card and telephones him. The two men meet for beers at a local bar, and Jack eventually gets around to asking if he can stay at Tyler's. Tyler consents, but he asks one favor of Jack: "I want you to hit me as hard as you can" (Fincher). Jack does so and Tyler of course returns the favor. The two men exchange blows, caught up in the exhilaration of a violence which allows them to return to a pre-capitalist notion of masculinity.

Tyler's house is a dilapidated two-story Victorian building on the aptly named "Paper Street." Tyler and Jack regularly return to the parking lot outside the bar, and their masochistic ballet begins to attract spectators. Eventually someone asks if he can have the next fight, and what was previously a two-man operation becomes a group activity. The club moves underground (literally), and on a weekly basis men from various professions and backgrounds meet to beat the proverbial pulp out of each other, escaping through the primitive flows that traverse their bodies in a veritable theatre of cruelty. The revolutionary character of the club is introduced innocently enough, with the distribution of "assignments" thought up by Tyler to the members. These assignments are basically exercises in "culture jamming." Eventually, they escalate in severity, and soon people are moving into the house on Paper Street to join "Project Mayhem," the destructive revolutionary organization into which the club has devolved. Almost overnight the house is transformed into an organism, as Jack notes: "The house became a living thing, wet inside from so many people sweating and breathing." Jack is astonished by the level of organization and clockwork-like motion of the house. Files labeled "mischief," "arson," and "disinformation" line the walls, and everywhere people are working diligently at some task, whether it be creating nitroglycerine or indoctrinating new "space monkeys" into the project. When a friend of Jack's, Bob, is

killed by an officer while committing an act of arson, Jack is struck with disbelief at the callous reaction of the space monkeys, who merely state “he was killed serving Project Mayhem, sir.” Jack explains that Bob is a person with a name, and that name is Robert Paulson. When the group starts chanting “his name was Robert Paulson,” Jack becomes aware that Project Mayhem has spun wildly out of control, and he becomes intent on ending it. Jack runs to the upstairs bedroom and, searching through the drawers, he discovers various ticket stubs addressed to Tyler Durden. He grabs them all and sets off tracing Tyler’s footsteps, “following an invisible man.” In each city he finds evidence of a fight club. As all of this is happening, the most surprising twist of the film is revealed when it becomes obvious that Jack is schizophrenic—not in the clinical sense, but in the Hollywood sense of the word. That is to say, Tyler is a mere figment of Jack’s imagination; they are the same person. Jack’s mission to put an end to Project Mayhem thus becomes a fight against himself.

The whole chain of events that makes up the second half of the film lends itself to three concepts (or plateaus) found in Deleuze and Guattari: regimes of signs and subjectification, micropolitics, and cruelty. I will explain and analyze each of these angles in turn. First, however, it is necessary to take a brief foray into a discussion of method and terminology in Deleuze and Guattari. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari’s overarching project might best be characterized as geological. That is, they analyze linguistics, biology, and society as constituted by strata. Here “strata” is borrowed from the geological term which indicates the layers of the earth, each composed of relatively homogenous material. Obviously Deleuze and Guattari are using it in a more general and conceptual sense, and by stratification they mean the most basic agent of what we see as organization or order. As Manuel Delanda explains “from the point of view of energetic and catalytic flows, human societies are very much like lava flows; and human-made structures (mineralized cities and institutions) are very much like mountains and rocks: accumulations of materials hardened and shaped by historical processes” (*A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* 55). Thus, Jack’s initial relationships with his job or with his furniture serve as *stratifying* elements in his life or subjectivity. Conversely, Jack’s relationship with Tyler Durden serves as a *destratifying* element in the same, in that it destroys Jack’s various connections with society. Additionally, Deleuze and Guattari describe assemblages, which are essentially relationships of strata that map onto a territory (*A Thousand Plateaus* 503-04).

The territory indicated here relates to the notion of a “ground,” in the broad sense. Hence, Jack’s subjectification is connected to an assemblage, that is, a certain combination of the various organizing and ordering forces that make up Jack, along with the way in which this combination relates to grounds or territories (power). For example, Jack variously grounds his subjectification in his career, in hope, or in support-groups; each of these are elements of an assemblage. Lastly, Deleuze and Guattari enumerate the types of *lines* which make up these assemblages and strata, which can be either molar, molecular, or lines of flight. Molar and molecular here are not correlates of size, but rather are respectively on the order of statistical aggregates and multiplicities. To give an example, the various confinements of a discipline society are molar, in that they are relationships of power based on molds: “first of all the family, then school (‘you’re not at home, you know’), then the barracks (‘you’re not at school, you know’), then the factory, hospital from time to time, maybe prison” (Deleuze *Negotiations* 177). Conversely, the confinements of a control society, like Jack’s, are more molecular, since they lack a set mold but are no less powerful: “You are not your job . . . you are not how much money you have in the bank . . . not the car you drive . . . not the contents of your wallet” (Fincher). While molecular and molar lines are stratifying, lines of flight are destratifying—that is, they are movements outside or between the strata. In simpler terms, they are escapes from the codes and assemblages which organize our lives. To give a particularly relevant example from the film, the destruction of Jack’s commercial identity (his wardrobe, apartment, and furniture) sets his trajectory on a line of flight from capitalism.

This tangential remark about the line of flight deserves further explanation. According to Deleuze and Guattari, lines of flight are “marked by quanta and defined by decoding and deterritorialization” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 222). In other words, these lines break through the strata and codes imposed on us. Given the conditions of control societies, this may seem like a good thing. However, lines of flight are not without their dangers, namely that of “the line of flight crossing the wall, getting out of the black holes, but instead of connecting with other lines and each time augmenting its valence, *turning to destruction, abolition pure and simple, the passion of abolition*” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 229). In other words, there is always a danger that the line of flight might take one from a path of deterritorialization to one of pure destruction. In their analysis, Deleuze and Guattari associate this transformation of the line of flight with fascism:

There is in fascism a realized nihilism. Unlike the totalitarian State, which does its utmost to seal all possible lines of flight, fascism is constructed on an intense line of flight, which it transforms into a line of pure destruction and abolition. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 230)

Fascism first rears its head with the establishment of the proper name (“fight club”) and an institutionalized set of rules. Later, when fight club gives way to Project Mayhem, it becomes more apparent that Jack’s line of flight has become destructive, veering towards fascism. Here we find a number of “space monkeys” indoctrinating new members, donning black shirts, and screaming slogans over megaphones. Additionally, instead of grounding identity in a concept of masculinity, the individual’s identity in the project is subordinate to the whole: “in Project Mayhem, we have no names” (Fincher). This is microfascism in full force, a perfect example of a line of flight turning into a line not of production but of abolition and destruction.

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze places the signifier of late-capitalism on the order of simulacra: “the simulacrum and the symbol are one; in other words, the simulacrum is the sign in so far as the sign interiorizes the conditions of its own repetition” (67). In *A Thousand Plateaus* this notion is present in spirit, but it is for the most part usurped by the “circularity of signs” and the “multiplicity of circles or chains” (113). The elements of the “regime of signs” serve as points of subjectification, as demonstrated for instance in Jack’s relationship with his furniture. In *Fight Club* it is precisely this regime of signs and its resulting subjectification that are under attack. The fight is unique in that it offers a retreat into a *pre-signifying* regime of signs, because the body takes the place of language as an enunciator of the human condition: “sometimes all you could hear were flat, hard packing sounds over the yelling” (Fincher). These are corporeal significations—that is, signifying agents of the body. The adversarial relationship which the fight club has to traditional linguistic signification is made clear by the first rule: “The first rule of fight club is you do not talk about fight club” (Fincher). Thus, the fight club interdicts the traditional linguistic sign.

And yet, despite this, the fight club and later Project Mayhem have their own logic of inscription. Deleuze and Guattari, in their earlier work *Anti-Oedipus* analyzed particularly well the unique nature that capitalism has with writing: “the [capitalist] axiomatic does not need to write in bare flesh, to mark bodies and organs, nor does it need to fashion a memory



for men" (250). In other words, society has in a certain sense reached "the end of history." In one of the polemics of the film, Tyler Durden declares before the others at the club: "we are the middle children of history —no purpose or place. We have no great war, no great depression" (Fincher). Arguably, history still exists; it is merely a history without the event, or even perhaps, the event as simulacra (Derrida). To give an example from personal experience of the event as simulacra, there is that event whose proper name coincides with the date of its occurrence. I recall that on September 11, 2001, after being surrounded non-stop by the repeated images of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center buildings, there was one response that was both extremely common and unsettling: "I feel like I'm watching a movie." It is as if, in our simulated culture, our only models for such a horrendous event come from films, that is, from things which are themselves copies, on the order of simulacra. To this history without event of late capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari contrast a memory of the body which they call "cruelty":

Cruelty has nothing to do with some ill-defined or natural violence that might be commissioned to explain the history of mankind; cruelty is the movement of culture that is realized in bodies and inscribed on them, belaboring them. . . . The sign is a position of desire; but the first signs are the territorial signs that plant their flags in bodies.

*(Anti-Oedipus 145)*

In other words, the fight can be conceived as a theatre of cruelty: the exchange of blows constitutes a joint effort to recommence history on the surface of the body. It is this theatre of cruelty which reinstates the ground and leads Jack to claim "you weren't alive anywhere like you were [at fight club]" (Fincher). An even better example of cruelty is found in the moment of the film where Tyler gives Jack the "kiss" scar. In this scene, Tyler kisses the back of Jack's hand, and then proceeds to pour lye on it. The oils from Tyler's lips and the lye react, burning an imprint of Tyler's lips onto Jack's hand. While the film portrays this act as an attempt to reach enlightenment, much as the Ascetics did, it is clear that the kiss scar illustrates quite literally the principle of cruelty. Similarly, the various acts of vandalism which Project Mayhem commits may be interpreted as cruelty or inscriptions on the urban body, thus constituting a marginal history.

In the last scene in the film, which is also the first scene earlier recounted, Jack and Tyler are on the top floor of a high-rise surrounded by the headquarters of major credit

buildings. The plan, the audience is lead to understand, is to destroy each of these buildings, and with them, the debt record. "Out these windows," Tyler remarks, "we will view the collapse of financial history" (Fincher). That debt is the object of Project Mayhem's plan of destruction is logical, because cruelty is not without a rival. What was the cruelty of the societies of sovereignty became the enclosure of the societies of discipline, and lastly the debt of control societies. In a control society, Deleuze writes, "[a] man is no longer a man confined but man in debt" (*Negotiations* 181). It thus makes sense that the largest plan in Project Mayhem involves destroying all the major credit buildings. As Jack explains, "if you erase the debt record, we all go back to zero; it'll create total chaos" (Fincher). Debt, of course, is one of the foremost institutions of power in capitalist society. Whether by a mortgage or credit bills, people often become enslaved by debt. To a certain extent, this is not entirely unique to control societies. Nietzsche famously demonstrated in *The Genealogy of Morals* the importance of the link between changes in the administration of debt and changes in society (§19-20). What is unique in control society is that the debt is not debt to the deity or to the ancestor but is debt to the capitalist system. If Nietzsche's thesis about the relationship between society and debt holds, then it is clear that the destruction of the debt record would have far-reaching consequences.

In the last moments of the film, a sweating disheveled Jack combats his other in Tyler. In the end, the line of flight is only ended by the final suicidal act: Jack shoots himself in the face. Tyler drops dead, while Jack is injured but relatively composed given the circumstances. Marla is ushered up by the members of Project Mayhem, and Jack dismisses the space monkeys. The last scene of *Fight Club* is, in a way, reminiscent of *The Graduate*, only perhaps for a postmodern generation: guy gets girl, the same uncertainty, The Pixies, though, instead of Simon and Garfunkel. The two bodies hold hands in a silhouette against a backdrop of collapsing buildings, juxtaposing love and destruction. This makes for a powerful scene, and though the conclusion is left open, it is suggested that—with Tyler gone and the Blackshirts out of the picture—love will win out over death, and something new will be built in the wake of the film's destruction.

What, then, are the implications of this film as far as the social bond is concerned? In an interview with Antonio Negri, Deleuze said that "we think any society is defined not so much by its contradictions as by its lines of flight" (*Negotiations* 171). If this is indeed the case, and further, if *Fight Club* is an illustration of one possible line of flight, then this aids

in understanding the nature of late capitalism. First, it highlights the dominance of debt as cruelty in contemporary society, which extends Nietzsche's critique in *The Genealogy of Morals* into the twenty-first century. Secondly, it shows the general malaise that has resulted from what Deleuze and Guattari term the "schizophrenic" aspects of late capitalism, especially regarding representation and simulacra. This is most evident in Jack's insomnia, his dependence on support-groups for the terminally ill, and lastly in the attempt to ground reality in the corporeality of the fight. Lastly, it shows that fascism is a possible line of flight with regard to capitalism. However, as the ending of the film suggests, fascism can be overcome internally. It is in the last moment of clarity, with the destructive line of flight turned against itself, that it can again become productive. Thus the film ends on an optimistic note as far as revolutionary movements are concerned, suggesting that one can come out on the other side of a suicidal line of flight alive and somewhat intact.

The question may still arise of the utility of such an analysis of the film. Well, given the film's unrealistic and sometimes bizarre nature, it would seem surprising that it has enjoyed such high popularity. It is well known that *Fight Club*, at the time this is written, is indeed one of the most popular films among college-age males. What does this say about popular culture, especially given the relevance that Deleuze's theory has for the film? This is purely speculative, but perhaps the film's popularity results from the fact that while it may be unrealistic at parts, the forces and societal problems dramatized in it are quite real: the end of history, control society, the institution of debt, and the reactionary appeal of a return to pre-capitalist concepts such as masculinity. That is to say, the film is popular not in spite of its theoretical resonances but rather because of them: a properly Deleuzian film for a properly Deleuzian century.

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## COMMENTARY

Rahul Sharma

Frankie Dintino's essay analyzes a popular film using controversial academic theories. In the end, he illuminates the condition of (certain) people as we rush into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and for that, his essay is an outstanding achievement. However, he does make a few questionable conclusions, which I would like to discuss.

The parenthetical modifier in the previous paragraph touches on the major problematic conclusion, which is that *Fight Club* is relevant to contemporary society because of its Deleuzian aspects. For whom are these times Deleuzian, though? Of course, Deleuze's idea is Eurocentric; much of the world is not part of the "post-modern information society" that has helped bring about a "society of control," in which digital checks have substituted visibly enclosed spaces as a primary mechanism for gaining and retaining power. In developed nations, however, everyone is presumably in a Deleuzian culture. But *Fight Club* slights major segments of society, and so does not have as much relevance as Mr. Dintino thinks. Also, due to the film's narrow, chauvinistic depiction of society, and a possible misreading of its final scene, Mr. Dintino's conclusion that "fascism can be overcome internally" is suspect.

Neither *Fight Club* nor Mr. Dintino seriously entertains the notion that most people happily enter into a "society of control" because they at least feel secure and powerful within the supposedly oppressive structure. The author writes: "I will draw upon parallels between *Fight Club* and contemporary society in general to demonstrate the reasons that the latter merits the appellation "the Deleuzian century." Later, he goes a step further and calls *Fight Club* the "quintessential Deleuzian film." Mr. Dintino is probably correct, but he never mentions that *Fight Club* only gives a voice to people like Jack, who is at first victimized by, and who later oozes hatred at, this kind of society. In the scant time the movie does give to people who do not feel as alienated and controlled as Jack—his boss, the women buying luxury soap at a department store—it adopts a mocking tone because those people do not *feel* controlled. Jack is in the minority, but the film seems to think otherwise. As Mr. Dintino writes, his name is utterly commonplace, which is usually a sign that a character is representative of the majority of society. Jack is a single, white, male, middle class insurance worker whose apartment is like an Ikea catalog; he is wholly unremarkable, but the film absurdly expects the viewer to believe that he will rapidly rise above his

materialism and meekness, transforming from caterpillar to butterfly— and a social one at that.

In focusing solely on aspects of the film that are Deleuzian, Mr. Dintino does not adequately critique how the film dishonors Deleuzian theory in its tendentious portrayal of the “society of control.” Even its depiction of the “rebel” niche is very limited, because Jack is a caricature, and he is practically the only major (real) character in the film. There are no major characters that are minorities, blue collar, or upper class, and the movie’s one female character, Marla, has almost no bearing on how the plot develops. Thus, *Fight Club*’s view of both the *zeitgeist* and the actual members of society is so narrow that it cannot be as socially relevant as Mr. Dintino claims. Considering how materialistic American society is, a more appropriate social commentary may come from movies in which gangs, fulfilling a similar “need” to reassert masculinity that Mr. Dintino observes is present in *Fight Club*, vie for social power through anti-social means. Turf wars, both on the street level and the international level, are still far more common than the nihilistic “culture jamming” *Fight Club* illustrates. Maybe things have not changed so much, after all.

Mr. Dintino’s contention about the significance of *Fight Club*’s finale is also partially tied to his neglect of the film’s chauvinism, in addition to some hopeful projecting on his part. He concludes, “[T]he ending of the film suggests [that] fascism can be overcome internally.” Describing and analyzing the final scene, when the credit card buildings crumble, he writes:

[Jack and his lover, Marla] hold hands in a silhouette against a backdrop of collapsing buildings, juxtaposing love and destruction. This makes for a powerful scene, and though the conclusion is left open, it is suggested that—with Tyler gone and the Blackshirts out of the picture—love will win out over death, and something new will be built in the wake of the film’s destruction.

Tyler and the Blackshirts are the least of anyone’s problems by the end of the film. The debt record has supposedly been wiped out, which Mr. Dintino writes “would have far-reaching consequences.” Are those consequences necessarily good, though? The author seems to envisage the finale as the commencement of the realization of some vague anarchist dream, imagining that, in chaos, we will come together just as Jack and Marla have—that “love will win out over death.” But Mr. Dintino also writes that there is uncertainty as to whether Jack

and Marla's relationship will survive. That is an understatement when considering Marla's recent discovery that Jack was schizophrenic for their entire relationship until that point, and that the man who made love to her has essentially gone the way of Tyler Durden. This does not seem to matter much to her, which makes sense, for their "love" is incredibly shallow; Jack has undergone so much self-discovery while Marla has remained a static freak prop who seems to be lucid at the end only because the focus is supposed to be on the crashing edifices. The symbolic value of their touching hands is thus meaningless because of the story's sexism. Also, even with Jack's "defeat" of Tyler, he is still unable to stop the buildings from collapsing; fascism is not, in fact, overcome internally. Before the Blackshirts disappear, their goal is set in motion and achieved. The viewer is only given Jack's perspective of the collapsing buildings, and has no idea what it must look and feel like for people on the ground, the rest of society in this "socially relevant" film. In his conclusion, Mr. Dintino offers optimistic reasons for why college-age males like *Fight Club*. Personally, I have never heard a fan of the film discuss "the end of history," "control society," or "the institution of debt," but maybe those topics resonate in an ineffable way for most people. It will be nice if the destruction is eventually of a creative kind, as Mr. Dintino believes, but one might just as easily see the finale as a prequel to *Battlefield Earth*.

The title of this publication is the reason I have concentrated on problematic aspects of Mr. Dintino's paper. This commentary could easily have been an encomium to the author's skill at communicating the significance of most theories he discusses; to his analysis of the way in which language is used (or not) in the fight club and why; and to his connection between the "theatre of cruelty" and the rebirth of history in the film, among many other excellent features. Doing that, however, would have merely merited a thank-you note from Mr. Dintino, not a meaningful response to continue a dialogue in which I am proud to participate.

#### RESPONSE

Frankie Dintino

The film *Fight Club* has offered up an uncharacteristically wide array of divergent interpretations for a film of its popularity and budget. These readings range from Diken and Lausten's analysis of the Zizekian implications of the film to Terry Lee's analysis of the film's portrayal of psychology vis-à-vis gender roles. The former of these focuses on the political and ignores the psychological, while the latter commits the reverse error. My paper,

for its part, falls into the first camp: it views the phenomena of the film through a historico-political lens. A corollary of this perspective is that the event ontologically precedes the subject. While this may explain my seeming ignorance to the film's misogyny, for instance, it still demands further explanation.

What then is one to make of the film's misogyny? My ignorance to this element of the film is due to the fact that I do not consider *Fight Club's* depiction of brute masculinity and the misogynistic undertones to be integral to the plot, as some critics have. If anything, Tyler Durden's diatribes on the plight of contemporary males are simply part of a general reactionary element present throughout the film which threatens the revolutionary endeavor. Additionally, I find the practice of extending what is merely the authors' prejudice to the entire social field to be a dubious enterprise. I will be the first to admit that my paper does a certain "violence" to the film (no pun intended). Upon listening to the various commentary tracks that accompany the DVD of *Fight Club*, it becomes clear that the "Deleuzian century" was not a major factor in the film's inception or creation. However, I feel that the film's reception, especially among college-age students, is another story. Certainly there are many whose appreciation of the film does not extend beyond the gory fight scenes and all-star cast. In addition to these people, though, I believe there is a significant minority who feel a certain *rapport* with the film in an ineffable way. I took it upon myself to provide a theoretical framework for this *rapport*, and in so doing to draw parallels between the film and society at large.

Mr. Sharma aptly points out that the film is solipsistic—even excessively so—and he holds that this perhaps exposes my claim of social relevance to a fatal flaw. On the one hand, this solipsism is dictated by the plot: up until the last moments the film is filtered through Jack's perception, maintaining his delusions and hallucinations throughout. On the other hand, as a dark satire the film does not aspire to paint the characters in the film as anything more than caricatures. Thus, Mr. Sharma is correct in concluding that the interpersonal level of the film is completely lacking. However, if one accepts the notion that the concepts in the film resonate with people in an ineffable way then this must be the result of the political and historical elements of the film, since they are the only ones presented in any depth. This would seem to support my claim to social relevancy, rather than hinder it.

Upon careful reflection, though, I have come to the conclusion that I was perhaps over-optimistic in my initial reading of the final scenes of the film. Earlier on in the film,



Jack describes Tyler's various hobbies, among which includes film projecting. Tyler's reason for taking on this job is because it "affords him other interesting opportunities," namely splicing single frames of pornography into family-films. In the last moment before *Fight Club* cuts to the credits, a penis is displayed for a split-second. This too has a dual interpretation: it can, for instance, be viewed as a final assertion of male dominance and misogyny. I, however, see it differently. To me it implies that the film just watched is not untainted, but that it has been contaminated by Tyler's influence. In other words, it asserts that we may never be completely finished with Tyler Durden, despite our strongest hopes.

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