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SOMETHING TO DO WITH A GIRL NAMED MARLA: EROS AND
GENDER IN FINCHER'S *FIGHT CLUB*

A way that can be walked
is not The Way
A name that can be named
is not The Name

— *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 1¹

The first rule of fight club is: you do not talk about fight club.
The second rule of fight club is: you do not talk about fight club.

— Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*²

David Fincher's 1999 film, *Fight Club*,³ has been characterized in many ways: as a romantic comedy,⁴ an exploration of white, middle-class male angst,⁵ an existentialist search for meaning amidst the moral ruins of late capitalism, an anarchist manifesto, and so on. But common to nearly every reading of the film, critical and laudatory alike, is the assumption that *Fight Club* is indisputably a celebration of misogynistic, masculinist virility and violence.⁶ On its face, this assumption appears so overwhelmingly obvious as to render superfluous any argumentation in support thereof, and absurd any opposing argumentation. Consider the ubiquitous homoerotic adulation of the male body; or Tyler Durden's (Brad Pitt's) lamentation at being part of a "generation of men raised by women;"⁷ or the titular subject of the film – a self-help group for men only, founded on the principle of life-affirmation through physical pulverization; or the fact that, besides the momentary appearance of a terminally ill cancer patient, there is but one named female

¹ All citations from the *Tao Te Ching* will be taken from, Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition*, translation and commentary by Jonathan Star (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2001).

² *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher (1999; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

³ In this paper I focus only on Fincher's film. My interpretation does not in any way consult or lean upon Palahniuk's novel: Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

⁴ See Ben Caplan, "Never Been Kicked," in ed. Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Fight Club (Philosophers on Film)* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012): 132-162.

⁵ A reading that seems to take on particular significance as this paper was begun in the midst of the 2016 Presidential contest between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump – the poster child for bitter white men.

⁶ Two prominent examples are Henry A. Giroux, "Private Satisfaction and Public Disorders: *Fight Club*, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence," *JAC* 21, No. 1 (Winter 2001): 1-31; and Cynthia A. Stark, "There's Something About Marla: *Fight Club* and the Engendering of Self-Respect," in ed. Wartenberg, *Fight Club (Philosophers on Film)*: 51-77.

⁷ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

character in the entire film; or the obsessive fetishizing of male genitalia, coupled with anxieties over phallic substitutes and the concomitant fears of castration. From the opening scene – the narrator kneeling with a gun barrel forced into his mouth,⁸ to the film's crescendo – the destruction of a dozen major credit card buildings, *Fight Club* relentlessly assaults the viewer with visceral images of shirtless, full-throated hyper-masculinity and violence, and with the quasi-philosophical misogynistic sermons of Tyler Durden.

But in spite of all this, *Fight Club's* thoughts on gender and violence are far more complex than they first appear. We should keep in mind that the film's embodiment of hyper-masculine aggression, Tyler, is a projection of a suffering and fragmented subjectivity amidst a psychotic breakdown. His status as the film's antagonist severely complicates any putative simple heroizing of Tyler's character or philosophy. We would also do well to note that despite her singularity as the only named female character in the film, Marla Singer is arguably the most interesting and admirable character in the film, with an evolving character arc that does not easily conform to traditional gender stereotypes or to standard Hollywood conceptions of feminine love or beauty. She is both strong and nurturing, brazen and uncouth but beautiful, and by turns confident and independent, vulnerable and insecure. She is the catalyst for the narrator's path to selfhood, without recapitulating the Western myth of the "eternal-feminine"⁹ – the pure, selfless, virginal ideal who, from her unattainable heights, motivates the "hero's quest". Marla does not "complete" him, nor he her. She conforms to no ideal, and she is neither a prize nor a simple plot device.¹⁰ Whatever else one might say about *Fight Club*, its attitudes toward gender and violence are not cut and dry.

What follows is an exploration of this complexity. In a formulation that will require elaboration and defense, we can say that *Fight Club* is a film about one's passage away from the late capitalist consumer's life of complacent passivity, and toward an exteriorizing and relational notion of selfhood based upon the principle of complementarity. This is most evident in the film's treatment of gender, and its relations to the complementary conceptual pairing of activity and passivity. Tyler's externalized irruption into the world of Fincher's *Fight Club* is a result of the narrator's attempted suppression of his own outwardly directed activity, in an effort to define himself as the good and faithful servant of passive consumption. As critics George Wilson and Sam Shpall note, Marla "forces him to face the artificiality of his conduct..."¹¹

⁸ A gesture that some theorists have noted for its homoerotic significance. See, for instance, Suzanne Clark, "Fight Club: Historicizing the Rhetoric of Masculinity, Violence, and Sentimentality," *JAC* 21, No. 2 (Spring 2001): 411-420, 417; See also Lynn M. Ta, "Hurt So Good: *Fight Club*, Masculine Violence, and the Crisis of Capitalism," *The Journal of American Culture* 29, No. 3 (September 2006): 265-277, 272.

⁹ This concept is given a name (Das Ewig-Weibliche) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the last lines of his *Faust* drama. See *Faust: A Tragedy, Norton Critical Edition*, 2nd edition, ed. Cyrus Hamlin, trans. Walter Arndt, (New York: Norton, 2001), 344. Simone de Beauvoir critiques this notion throughout her text, *The Second Sex*, particularly in Volume I, Part 3, Chapter 2. See *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde, (New York: Vintage, 2011), 214-265.

¹⁰ This will be explored in greater detail later in the paper. While Marla is not *simply* a plot device, in that she has her own evolution, it is nevertheless clear that the film is primarily the story of the male narrator, not Marla.

¹¹ George M. Wilson and Sam Shpall, "Unraveling the Twists of *Fight Club*," in ed. Wartenberg, *Fight Club (Philosophers on Film)*: 78-111, 99.

Her injection of spiritual complexity into the narrator's world challenges the fractured and oppositional dualism that structures his life, provoking the internal confrontation that sets him on the path toward complementarity. *Fight Club* thus provides a depiction of selfhood that is always and essentially relational, both within the self itself, and in the self's relations to others; and it is only by way of this realization that the narrator is able to finally begin a meaningful relationship with Marla.

Hence the interpretive lens that I shall employ is the ancient Chinese principle most commonly referred to as yin yang philosophy, and most prevalently elaborated in Taoism. With an ontology of essential complementarity at the heart of all things, yin yang philosophy posits a constitutive playful tension to account for the multiplicity of phenomena. Before opening the discussion, I should offer a brief defense of my interpretive choices – of gender and complementarity as the key issues of the film and of yin yang philosophy as the most illuminating interpretive lens. First, the yin yang coffee table in the center of the narrator's living room is not only visually prominent in our introduction to the narrator; it is also explicitly named as one of the material objects by which he defines "who he is as a person." The irony of this ancient and revered symbol of balance and simplicity, co-opted by capitalist marketing and contorted into a mass-produced, kitschy consumer good, is too piercing to be accidental. Then when the narrator returns to discover his condominium blown up and his possessions scattered in the rubble below, one of the most prominent and discernible possessions we see is this yin yang table, charred and broken, signifying imbalance and disharmony. In both instances the center of the symbol, to which Chuang Tzu referred as the "pivot of the Tao,"¹² is occluded – pre-explosion by another consumer good; and post-explosion, by a char mark caused by the fire.



Figure 1: Narrator's apartment, with yin yang table

¹² *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Martin Palmer, with Elizabeth Breuilly, Chang Wai Ming, and Jay Ramsay (New York: Penguin, 1996), 12.



Figure 2: The ruins of the narrator's condominium

Finally, if I take as my point of entry and primary object of analysis the question of complementarity through the dimension of *gender*, it is because the narrator himself advises at the film's outset that we do so: "And suddenly, I realize that all of this – the gun, the bombs, the revolution – has got something to do with a girl named Marla Singer."¹³ The film is framed by this signpost and by the concluding image of Marla and the narrator, holding hands as the culmination of Project Mayhem's vision unfolds (figure 3). This interpretive choice is therefore based upon the narrator's characterization of the narrative as a "love" story of sorts.



Figure 3: The narrator and Marla hold hands as the credit card buildings collapse

We now turn to our discussion of *Fight Club*. First, I shall briefly lay out the elements of Taoist thought most central to the reading I here proffer.

I. LETTING NOW THE DARK, NOW THE LIGHT APPEAR

In ancient Chinese thought, the Tao is synonymous with the absolute or supreme reality. But the Tao bears almost nothing in common with Western anthropomorphic conceptions of divinity, "in the sense of the ruler, monarch, commander, architect, and maker of the universe."¹⁴ The Tao is not a person, and hence it does not think, know, plan, will, or love. It neither gives nor obeys any law; and Taoism on the whole is resistant to rigid codes of

¹³ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

¹⁴ Alan Watts, with the collaboration of Al Chung-Liang Huang, *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 40.

propriety and law. Finally, while the Tao is understood as *eternal*, its eternality is conceivable only as process and fluctuation, as opposed to the Western conception of unchanging, timeless, enduring self-presence. In this sense, it bears more in common with Heraclitean fire than with traditional monotheistic conceptions of God.

Its one similarity with Western notions of the divine is that the Tao is the ultimate ground of being, its origin and its end, as well as its ordering and guiding impetus. But the significance of this grounding and ordering is unique. "Tao" is most commonly rendered in English as "the way," in the sense of the *way of nature* or the *way of the universe*. Lao Tzu claims that it "guides without forcing... serves without seeking... brings forth and sustains life," but "does not own or possess it."¹⁵ It "does not act / yet it is the root of all action..." "does not move / yet it is the source of all creation."¹⁶ Breaking down the ideogrammatic components of the sign for the Tao, consisting of signs for "head" and "movement," Alan Watts characterizes the Tao as "intelligent rhythm."¹⁷ It is that by which the manifold of existence manifests and fluctuates, but the Tao is not an "agent," nor is it ontologically distinct from its manifestations or from the material on which the activity of creation is performed. The way of nature is not distinct from nature: "Tao and this world seem different / but in truth they are one and the same / the only difference is in what we call them."¹⁸ It is the immanent principle of rhythmic organization that eternally guides and shapes the operations of the cosmos, from which it is not distinct.

The expressive generation of beings themselves takes place by way of an ontological complementarity of cosmic forces, the *yin* and the *yang*. In the strictest sense, the ideograms for "yin" and "yang" signify, respectively, "the shadowed and the light side of a mountain or a river."¹⁹ They are the complementary aspects of the same, singular reality, or as Watts claims, "an explicit duality expressing an implicit unity."²⁰ The yin force is understood as the negative, the dark, the passive, the feminine, the still, and the weak, while the yang force is conceived as the positive, the light, the active, the male, the moving, and the strong. But this immediately provokes concerns. As it relates to sex/gender categories, the "feminine" in the yin yang duality is grouped on the same side of the pairings as the "weak" and the "passive." To the Western eye, attuned to a hierarchical privileging of strength, power, and activity, this placement of the feminine on the side of the passive and the weak smacks of the patriarchal relegation of the feminine to a subordinate and inferior position.

There are a few things we must keep in mind. First, it cannot be overstated that in Taoism, this binarity truly is an essential, non-hierarchical, creative complementarity. Just as electricity is not possible without the play of the positive and negative, so too the myriad expressions of the cosmos would not

¹⁵ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 10.

¹⁶ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 37.

¹⁷ Alan Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, 40.

¹⁸ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 1.

¹⁹ *The I Ching or Book of Changes, The Richard Wilhelm Translation*, trans. Cary F. Baynes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 297.

²⁰ Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, 26.

arise without the dance of yin and yang, passive and active. Second, the feminine and the masculine on the Taoist understanding are understood as natural *principles*, not as defining or essential characteristics of individual human beings. They are forces expressing a cosmic complementarity that also expresses itself in the biological world as the anatomical binarity of male and female, and we need think of the feminine as passive and the masculine as active in no sense other than the sheer, anatomical fact of the concavity and convexity of their respective sex organs. Moreover, every human being for the Taoist is and ought to be a multiplicity of activities and passivities. Lao Tzu writes, "All beings support *yin* and embrace *yang* / and the interplay of these two forces / fills the universe."²¹ Insofar as this complementarity goes all the way down, Taoist thought appears entirely inconsistent with gender essentialism, and nothing in the thought of yin and yang prohibits a wide array of gender combinations and expressions.²²

We can also say that if there *were* a privileging of one or the other, it would almost certainly fall on the side of the feminine rather than the masculine. The Tao itself is understood as both the *all* and the *nothing*, respectively as *t'ai chi* and *wu chi*. As the *all*, the Tao is the expressed totality of individuated beings in relation to one another – the differentiation in motion. But insofar as these individuated beings are themselves in constant fluctuation, there is nothing ontologically abiding or unchanging about them, nothing that would constitute them as "things" independent of each other. They are in constant negotiation and relation with all other things. Hence the Tao is also the *nothing*, the undifferentiated stillness serving as the materiality upon which the Tao as *active* operates. And in this pairing of the *all* and the *nothing*, there is a sense in which the *nothing* of the Tao ontologically precedes its manifestations and differentiations. According to Lao Tzu, "The existent world is born of the nothingness of Tao."²³ Stillness is the condition of motion, materiality the condition of activity, and the *all* cannot move unless its empty spaces enable that movement. Prior to its being imaged in the famous *t'ai chi* symbol (figure 4), the Tao was first represented in ancient Chinese thought by an empty circle, signifying *nothing*. In his commentary on the *I Ching*, Richard Wilhelm writes of the *t'ai chi* as signifying the "primal beginning." But he goes on to say, "A still earlier beginning, *wu chi*, was represented by the symbol of a circle."²⁴ The cosmic nothingness is older in Chinese thought than even the "primal beginning." Moreover, even as the symbol for the *t'ai chi* supplanted that of the empty circle, the emptiness was retained in "the pivot of the Tao," the center point of the *t'ai chi*, between the light and the dark, remaining perfectly still as the condition of the Tao's rotations. Chuang Tzu claims that the "pivot provides the center of the circle, which is without end, for it can react equally to that which is and to that which is not."²⁵ Lao Tzu also compares the *nothing* to the center of a circle: "Thirty spokes of a wheel all join at a common hub / yet only the hole at the center / allows the

²¹ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 42.

²² For an opposing view, see Arun Saldanha, "Against Yin-Yang: The Dao of Feminist Universalism," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. XVII, No. 2 (June 2012), 145-168.

²³ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 40.

²⁴ *The I Ching, or Book of Changes*, lv.

²⁵ *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, 12.

wheel to spin.”²⁶ Prior to the activity of the *t'ai chi*, there is the passivity of the *wu chi*: as Saldanha writes, “*de* is the masculine vitality borne from the feminine nonbeing of the Dao.”²⁷ So if there *were* to be a privileging in Taoist thought, it would fall on the side of the feminine. It is perhaps for this reason that, when Taoist texts refer to the Tao in a personified form, it is almost always feminine: “She is called the Hidden Creator,”²⁸ “the Mother of the world.”²⁹



Figure 4: The *t'ai chi*, commonly referred to as the *yin yang* symbol

Finally, given that the Tao is the guiding principle of nature, its rhythmic direction is uncircumventable. Watts refers to the Tao as the “Watercourse Way,”³⁰ conceiving of it both as the oceanic source and destination of being, as well as the differentiated rivers and streams feeding into it. Chuang Tzu refers to “... the Great Ocean... Ten thousand rivers flow into it, and it has never been known to stop, but it never fills.”³¹ And like the river, the Tao cannot be forced against its nature, nor are we capable of swimming against its currents; the more effort that human beings exert to constrain it, the more determinedly it will rebound with a counterforce, like a spring after being tightly compressed: “that which is forced is likely to return...”³² Thus, given that the yin and the yang *are* the creative complementarity of the Tao, it follows that an effort to constrain one of its aspects will result in a violent and unexpected irruption of the same. With that, we turn to our reading of *Fight Club*.

II. THE IKEA NESTING INSTINCT

We are given a tremendous amount of information in the film’s opening minutes, learning much of what we need in order to understand who the narrator is. He has no name, lives in a nameless city, and works for a nameless automobile manufacturer. He is everyone, and no one in particular. His life has become one of unmitigated passivity, inwardly directed energy, by his own admission defined entirely in accordance with his consumption

²⁶ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 11.

²⁷ Saldanha, “Against Yin-Yang,” 153.

²⁸ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 6.

²⁹ Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 52.

³⁰ Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, 41.

³¹ *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, 137-138.

³² Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 30.

choices. As he says, "Like so many others I had become a slave to the Ikea nesting instinct... I'd flip through catalogs and wonder, what kind of dining set defines me as a person?"³³ This early image is particularly revelatory (Figure 5).



Figure 5: The narrator in his bathroom

Lynn Ta writes, "This scene mimics the image of a masturbating man, sitting in the privacy of his bathroom, looking at pornography, and participating in phone sex."³⁴ We learn, however, that he is holding a furniture catalog, from which he is placing an order, after which he disaffectedly tosses the catalog onto a stack of others, (again hearkening toward while subverting a stereotypical image of a single man's bathroom). A few moments later in his own self-introduction, the narrator says, "We used to read pornography. Now it was the Horchow collection."³⁵ This image is revelatory for two reasons. First, it disrupts our expectations about what an image like this would typically suggest, and in so doing, it reverses the directionality of the *energies* that these two different activities would involve. From the expectation of a masturbatory experience with another human being on the phone, which would at least have *some* characteristics of an interpersonal experience (however cheaply commodified), the reality is reversed. The narrator is not reaching *outwardly*, he is consuming – taking *in*. Yet, second, he is in the process of putting *something* out into the world – he is, after all, defecating, outputting the byproducts of his consumption choices. The narrator thus embodies in this momentary image the cycle of consumption and waste. He is not an outwardly directed and active conduit of the Tao, but an inwardly directed conduit of passive consumption.

As this conduit, he is living the life of an empty shell. We learn that he is suffering from his passive emptiness, and this suffering manifests in his six-month bout with insomnia, a losing battle that has begun to blur the lines between the real and the imagined. As he says, "With insomnia, nothing's real. Everything's far away. Everything's a copy... of a copy... of a copy."³⁶ He's never really awake and never really asleep, neither truly alive nor truly dead. Initially, his strategy for dealing with this suffering involves the hope of yet another consumption choice – he begs his doctor to prescribe him a pill: a

³³ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

³⁴ Ta, "Hurt So Good," 274.

³⁵ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

³⁶ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

consumer solution for a consumer problem. The doctor instead suggests natural alternatives, denying the narrator the easy, consumer fix.

This interaction prompts the narrator's first visit to a support group for men with testicular cancer, most of whom had lost their testicles. Here too, we learn a great deal more about the nature of the narrator's struggle, through the lenses of both himself and of Bob. When the group leader suggests that the men break into pairs and "really open up" to each other, the passive narrator sits alone as the rest of the men, one by one, arise and partner up, until only the narrator and Bob remain. Still, the narrator awkwardly sits, until Bob approaches him and extends a hand, which the narrator accepts. At first, Bob lays his head upon the narrator's shoulder, crying as he opens up about his excessive steroid use that, we are led to believe, was the cause of his testicular cancer. Following his emotional revelation, the narrator buries his face into Bob's chest, and begins sobbing uncontrollably (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Bob and the narrator at support group



Figure 7: Tear-stained smiley face

This moment, too, is doubly revelatory. On the one hand, the narrator's emotional outpouring is therapeutic. He says, "I let go, lost in oblivion, dark and silent and complete. I found freedom – losing all hope was freedom."³⁷ This loss of hope is not nihilistic, but a release of the tendency toward inward clinging and self-enclosure; and this, we are told, is synonymous with freedom. But this is instructive – the narrator finds *freedom* because he is able to *ex-press* emotion ("to express" literally meaning "to press outwardly"). Emotions as typically characterized are passive – we are not their active

³⁷ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

causes; they happen *to* us. But if the narrator is living a life of passivity, the only way that his emotional catharsis can be understood as liberating is if passivity is only *really* passive through its active manifestations. To **be** emotional is, first and foremost, to **be**. It is to *actualize* one's emotions in an outward manner, and thus, to be emotional is, at the same time, to be active. This moment is therapeutic for the narrator because he is, for the first time, living and acting his passivity, and in this sense he is active. It is no accident that the imprint left upon Bob's shirt by the narrator's emotional outpouring resembles a happy face (Figure 7).

It is therefore in this moment that the full nature of the narrator's suffering comes into view. It is not only that the narrator is living a life of passivity; rather, it is the case that he lives this passivity in suppression of his active forces. His complementarity is being suppressed, a point made more salient in the image of the charred yin yang coffee table. This moment with Bob reveals that his passivity can only truly be passive in an active way. The narrator craves complementarity, a fact that he later confesses to Marla in their first conversation, when he says, "when people think you're dying, people really listen to you, instead of..." at which point Marla interrupts with the recognition, "instead of waiting for their turn to speak?"

Bob's story makes the same point, but from the perspective of activity. Bob had led his life dedicated to his masculinity, in an effort to suppress his passivity and his femininity. He had been a champion bodybuilder, and in his obsessive pursuits of glory in this domain, he had consumed dangerous amounts of steroids, including some which were specifically designed for racehorses.³⁸ But Bob's story highlights his inability to be *purely* active. First, to embody active masculinity in the way, to the degree and for the reasons that Bob does, is at the same time to turn oneself into a passive object of judgment for the gaze of others. But more directly in the case of Bob, the extreme consumption of steroids had resulted in his testicular cancer, the treatments for which had elevated his body's testosterone levels, with the result that his body compensated by elevating its estrogen levels. As a result of his steroid use in the pursuit of unfettered masculinity, Bob had not only lost his testicles, but he had also developed breasts. In this moment, the narrator and Bob demonstrate that the passive can only be passive through the active, and the active can only be so through the passive. Bob also foreshadows a truth that is relevant to the overall plot of the film – efforts to forcibly suppress one pole of the essential complementarity of life will result in the reciprocally forcible eruption of that pole. Bob's body exemplifies the knowledge that his mind had lacked.

III. *THE BIG TOURIST: ENCOUNTERING MARLA*

As we have already seen, in the opening moments of the film, mere seconds before the impending culmination of Project Mayhem, the narrator reflects that "all of this – the gun, the bombs, the revolution – has got something to do with a girl named Marla Singer."³⁹ The night of his first support group

³⁸ An animal, we should note, whose anatomical endowments are often crassly equated with extreme masculinity.

³⁹ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

meeting with Bob, the narrator sleeps, soundly and peacefully. The discovery of this emotional outlet soon turns, however, into another consumer addiction, as he notes: "I became addicted."⁴⁰ Moreover, the emotional release that the narrator achieves in these groups, which, we later discover, he attends for a year prior to meeting Marla, is predicated entirely on lies. Each night of the week is dedicated to a different support group, where the narrator assumes a pseudonym, pretending a shared affliction, to parasitically partake in the drama of human suffering, like a vampire feeding on the living. This emotional engagement is the narrator's newest drug, his new consumption. As he says, "I wasn't really dying... I was the warm little center that the life of this world crowded around."⁴¹ This complementarity is thus, like the identities that he constructs anew each night, illusory and ultimately doomed to exhaust itself, an exhaustion provoked when the narrator first meets Marla.

Marla's introduction complicates the narrator's life for multiple reasons. Most immediately, her omnipresence at all of the narrator's support groups directs his energy back inward. He is no longer able to release because he is ever aware of someone in the group who knows of his deception, and the perceived moral judgment is inhibitive. He says of Marla, "her lie reflected my lie."⁴² But as he no longer has his emotional release, he can no longer sleep. Moreover, inasmuch as she reflects his own deceptions back onto himself, Marla is sexually intriguing to him. Marla engages in the same lies, but from what appears to be a different set of motivations, and with utter disregard for whatever opinions others might have of her. Where her presence paralyzes him, his presence does not faze her in the least. Her hair unkempt, her clothes outlandish, her habits brazen, she exudes an alluring confidence that captivates the narrator, and much of his early expression of frustration over Marla turns out to be an indecipherable, unconscious attraction to her. As Lynn Ta notes, "Their relationship develops as a contentious one, but is also characterized by an undercurrent of sexual tension."⁴³ We know this because he insists on unnecessarily exchanging phone numbers with her, and when the narrator's condominium blows up, he first calls Marla's number, nervously hanging up when she answers the phone.

Finally, the narrator's interest in Marla is rooted, as becomes apparent later in the film, in the fact that Marla exemplifies a complementarity to her character, one that the narrator has not been able to find in himself. Upon first encountering Marla, the viewer may assume that she is a personified embodiment of activity, yang to the narrator's yin. She smokes in public in the presence of cancer patients, she speaks exactly what is on her mind, she snags other people's laundry only to sell it in a pawn shop, she crosses the street when convenient for her, (not the cars), and when she and the narrator part company after their impromptu agreement regarding the division of support groups, she does not seem to care. But Marla is certainly not Tyler, nor does she play a role parallel to that of Tyler. Marla eventually begins to express feelings for the narrator and seems genuinely sorry at the mention of

⁴⁰ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

⁴¹ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

⁴² *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

⁴³ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

Chloe's death, she tends lovingly to the burn wound on the narrator's hand and inquires in a deeply concerned way as to its provenance, and she is clearly able to be hurt by the narrator's brutish negligence and cruelty. She demonstrates aspects of active forces, but she is clearly not bereft of passive forces.

She thus embodies complementarity, to which the narrator, incapable as he is on his own of living this complementarity, is drawn. In parting ways, they agree to split up the support groups perfectly evenly, down to an alternating weekly schedule for one of the groups, to compensate for the odd number of days in a week. But before letting Marla slip out of his life, the narrator shouts that they should exchange phone numbers, in case they should need to swap nights for some reason. This is the narrator's passive aggressive way of establishing Marla's contact information, and she seems, by the sarcasm in her voice at his suggestion, to recognize this. Though they part company, the challenge that Marla has presented in the life of the narrator is one that he cannot ignore. Drawn to Marla, but incapable of initiating on his own a relationship with her due to his paralytically passive character, the narrator's suppressed active forces at last burst forth into the world as the externalized projection of Tyler Durden.

IV. *THE ALL SINGING, ALL DANCING, CRAP OF THE WORLD*

Shortly after the break with Marla, the narrator "meets" Tyler, officially, for the first time. Seated next to each other on an airplane, Tyler and the narrator strike up a conversation that culminates in their exchange of business cards. This turns out to be fortuitous, because when their plane lands, the narrator returns home to find his condominium and possessions destroyed. The narrator calls the number on Tyler's business card, a moment that establishes the relationship dynamic that Tyler and the narrator embody. The narrator telephones Tyler, but as we know, the narrator is passive, not active; and calling someone on the telephone is an activity (the very reason that he hung up on Marla when she answered). It is no surprise that his call to Tyler is unanswered. Conversely, Tyler is incapable of passivity. When the narrator calls, Tyler does not answer. He "69s" the narrator, claiming, "I never answer my phone,"⁴⁴ thus establishing from the outset of their relationship the balance of power. The narrator's passivity with respect to Tyler's activity is once again displayed just after their first drink and conversation in Lou's bar, when the narrator, again in the mode of passive aggression, says to Tyler, "I should find a hotel,"⁴⁵ obviously hoping that Tyler will extend an offer without the narrator's having to ask. It is at this moment that Tyler initiates the first fight of what will become Fight Club.

The introduction of Tyler and the birth of fight club launch a progressively intensifying trajectory of active forces in the narrator's world. This trajectory is best summarized as a journey from "mischief" to "mayhem."⁴⁶ First, we learn of Tyler's "back story," consisting of the nightly contamination of the consumer goods of bourgeois society. He works night jobs, which allows him

⁴⁴ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

⁴⁵ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

⁴⁶ The tagline is "Mischief. Mayhem. Soap."

to issue bodily secretions into the food of upscale restaurants, and splice single frames of pornographic images, specifically male genitalia, into family films. He steals human fat from the dumpsters of liposuction clinics, in order to manufacture designer soaps, which he then sells back to the very same class of people who pay for liposuction in the first place, ironically perpetuating the simulacra of vain consumption.

This mischief is the logical expression of Tyler's character. Tyler is everything that the narrator cannot be. He's chiseled and charming, tough, confident, and daring. He is sexually voracious and, lacking any moral or emotional inhibitions, he is completely free to pursue his desires, actualizing his sexuality outwardly into the world. He does not care about consumer goods, attempting at one point to ventriloquize the narrator with the proclamation that "we reject the basic assumption of civilization, especially the importance of material possessions."⁴⁷ Tyler is not afraid of physical pain, and like Marla, he is uninterested in what anyone thinks of him. As fight club evolves from its phase of anarchic assemblage in the parking lot of Lou's, to the basement, and finally, into Project Mayhem concentrated in Tyler's dilapidated Paper Street house, this actively mischievous disposition assumes a more philosophical focus.

Tyler provides and develops the philosophical backbone of the movement and its evolution, culminating in the destruction of twelve major credit card companies. This philosophical undergirding conveys an extreme and imbalanced version of the Taoist affirmation of passage and flux – "I say, let's evolve; let the chips fall where they may."⁴⁸ In his essentially active comportment, Tyler is the very embodiment of outwardly directed energy. We can even think of it as an inherently libidinous mode of comportment to the whole of the natural world, manifested to such an extreme degree that in the erotic opening of the self, the self is entirely lost. This kenosis is akin to self-destruction, but this self-destruction is not nihilistic, but expansionary, like an energy source burning so brightly as to exhaust itself. As the narrator and Tyler board a bus, the narrator looks disdainfully at a Gucci advertisement of two slender and muscularly defined men, asking Tyler, "Is that what a man looks like?" To this, Tyler mockingly laughs and responds, "Self-improvement is masturbation. But self-destruction..." If self-improvement can be thought of as a masturbatory, inwardly directed energy, then Tyler's Nietzschean self-destruction, with its unflinching willingness to dissolve the self outwardly, can be understood as Tyler's sense of sexuality itself. Sexuality, activity, and self-destruction are all aspects of the same reality for Tyler.

Tyler's philosophy is indeed uncompromisingly masculine in its focus. Fight Club is a therapy group explicitly "for men only." Its therapeutic efficacy lay in its "return to nature" ethos – men strip themselves not only of shirts and shoes, but also of their social statuses, in the name of loosening a perceived societal feminization and loss of power, reclaiming a hunter-gatherer masculinity. In their early weeks together, their "Ozzie and Harriet" phase, Tyler and the narrator converse about their aimless drifts through life, with

⁴⁷ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

⁴⁸ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

Tyler speculating on the prospect of marriage: "We're a generation of men raised by women – I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need."⁴⁹ Later, as the narrator reflects in a voiceover on the significance of *Fight Club*, he claims that "When a guy came to Fight Club for the first time, his ass was a wad of cookie dough; after a few weeks, he was carved out of wood."⁵⁰ And Tyler explicitly outlines the vision of Fight Club as the agonistic redemption of the "strongest and smartest men who've ever lived," who, he says, have "no purpose or place... no great war, no great depression... Our great war," he says, "is a spiritual war."⁵¹ And in a semi-poetic musing offered as the narrator drifts in and out of consciousness, Tyler says:

In the world I see, you're stalking elk through the damp canyon forest around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. You'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life. You'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. And when you look down, you will see tiny figures pounding corn and laying strips of venison in the empty carpool lane of some abandoned super-highway.⁵²

Tyler's vision is one of a post-historic, anarchic state of nature, where unfettered masculinity is the order of the day. As Cynthia Stark writes, "Once this transformation has taken place on a large enough scale, society itself can be transformed. The new society will ensure that men *remain* men."⁵³

As already noted, Tyler is the antagonist of the film, who is ultimately to be overcome. Thus we should not take Tyler's views at face value as the voice of the film. However, we should note that there are aspects of Tyler's philosophical outlook crucial to the narrator's own character arc, and thus, there are elements of this philosophy that the film leaves intact, even when Tyler exits. The narrator's existential paralysis resides in the fact that he lives a life of passivity, attempting to completely suppress his active forces. Everything that Tyler does and says to the narrator involves the effort to reorient this tendency. Destroying his condominium is an attempt to jar him from his obsession with material possessions. The chemical burn upon the narrator's hand is designed to provoke the narrator's recognition of his own mortality, to affirm and embrace the fact that he is part of the "all singing, all dancing crap of the world" that will one day pass into the ocean of nothingness. Tyler's encouragement to let go of the steering wheel in the limousine, allowing the car to veer off the road, flipping the car and harming its occupants, is his way of attempting to loosen from the narrator his pretensions to control. Tyler expresses (albeit in an extreme way) the activity that the narrator lacks.

However, just as the passive apart from the active cannot be truly passive, the active, unfettered and unmitigated by passivity, cannot truly be active. The

⁴⁹ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

⁵⁰ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

⁵¹ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

⁵² *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.

⁵³ Cynthia A. Stark, "There's Something About Marla: *Fight Club* and the Engendering of Self-Respect," in *Fight Club (Philosophers on Film)*, ed. Thomas E. Wartenberg (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 68.

most obvious sense of this incapacity is visible in the members of Project Mayhem. As Tyler's persona, his "will to power," intensifies, Fight Club alone is no longer sufficient for Tyler's actualization. His ambitions shift from the tavern basement, to the widespread disruption of the social order, and ultimately to a nationwide anarchist group bent on destroying headquarters of twelve major credit card companies. As members of Project Mayhem, the erstwhile members of Fight Club are stripped of their identities. Subjected to days of humiliation and rejection before admittance into the Paper Street house, they shave their heads, relinquish their names, dress like soldiers, surrender their rights, and fideistically chant the tenets of Project Mayhem, all the while attempting to coherently reconcile the increasingly schizophrenic dictates of their leader. The members of Project Mayhem leave behind one life of servility, only to embrace another. They are no less subordinate under Tyler's regime than they were in their lives prior to meeting Tyler. Tyler's activity can only be such by way of a massive assemblage of passive foot soldiers.

V. SOMETHING TO DO WITH A GIRL NAMED MARLA

The most significant shortcoming of Tyler's pure yang energy, however, resides in the fact that it is *powerless* or *unable* to love. As we've seen, in his explicit reflections on women, Tyler expresses disregard and disdain, and Fight Club is specifically dedicated to the remasculization of society's men. It is therefore little surprise that Tyler repeatedly uses Marla to discharge his sexual urges, only to afterwards treat her with contempt. In spite of the fact that Marla clearly has feelings for him, she embodies for Tyler what Stark calls "toxic femininity,"⁵⁴ and is useful only as a vessel of libidinous gratification. During one particularly rambunctious session, the narrator approaches Tyler's bedroom door, and Tyler answers, wearing durable rubber gloves, the kind one might wear when cleaning a bathroom. At the end of every sexual escapade between Tyler and Marla, when he has exhausted his desires and his physical stamina, Tyler loses all interest in any further contact with her, leaving to the narrator the task of dispatching her. Tyler, as pure activity, is constitutionally incapable of love.

What of it?, we might wonder. As pure activity, Tyler likely doesn't *suffer* from the fact that he is unable to love Marla. He is likely perfectly happy in his ravenous, animalistic carnality with her, so why does it matter? There are two responses we can give. First, whether or not Tyler is *aware* of this incapacity is irrelevant. Marla highlights with respect to the narrator the limitations constitutive of his activity. She demonstrates an inherent *weakness* in the notion of pure activity, in the following way: love, insofar as it opens the self to vulnerability, requires a willingness to be weak; and it takes tremendous strength to be weak in this way, just as it takes tremendous strength to be weak enough to forgive, or to be weak enough to trust. As pure activity, Tyler is not strong enough to be weak.

Second, this inability is directly problematic, in that Marla was the primary catalyst for the subjective rupture that produced Tyler in the first place. Nancy Bauer writes that Tyler is a "massive flight from his [the narrator's]

⁵⁴ Stark, "There's Something About Marla," 69.

panic in the face of his feeling for Marla, which, since it's his feeling, constitutes a flight from himself."⁵⁵ As passive, the narrator was incapable of initiating a relationship with Marla; and this psychic disharmony at last emerged as the projected Tyler. Tyler is indeed successful at the sexual level, in a way that the narrator never could have undertaken on his own. But when it comes to meaningful relationality, of the sort for which the narrator expressed desire in his first discussion with Marla, Tyler is powerless. Hence, Tyler alone fails at his appointed task.

As pure *passivity*, the narrator is also incapable of love. He is first unable to express his romantic interest in Marla. As they part company after their first conversation, he snidely says to her, "Well, let's not make a big thing out of it, OK?" He is afraid to ask her directly for her phone number, and does not even give her his name. He calls her for help when his condominium is destroyed, but hangs up without speaking to her. Then, when Tyler and Marla begin their sexual relationship, his suppressed jealousy of *both* Tyler and Marla manifests in the callous disregard that he demonstrates towards Marla's feelings, because in his passivity, he is incapable of expressing his emotion in any way other than passive aggression. His parting words to her after their sexual exploits thus come across to Marla as the cheap shots they are, designed to inflict the maximum amount of emotional sting that they can deliver. And Marla's reactions assure us that they are effective. As distinct embodiments of activity and passivity, Tyler and the narrator are incapable of love. We should note that it is Marla who effectively ends the tenuous and schizophrenic relationship with Tyler/narrator. Just before the final showdown with Tyler, Marla says to the narrator: "There are things about you I like ... but you're intolerable... you have very serious emotional problems, deep-seated problems for which you should seek professional help... I can't do this anymore... I can't... I won't... I'm gone."⁵⁶

Only when the narrator comes to understand his relationship to Tyler can he begin to forge the path that will result in his attainment of a selfhood based upon essential complementarity, and it is only when this point is reached that he is capable of embarking on a meaningful relationship with Marla. This brings us to the final moments of the film, which pick up from the film's beginning. When the narrator at last tracks Tyler down, and the final decisive battle begins, the narrator is operating under a misunderstanding. Though he may cognitively recognize the oneness of self and Tyler, he has not yet embraced this reality in full. We know this because he is still, by turns, purely passive and purely active. In his purely passive moments, we see Tyler dragging the narrator by his collar, just before a security camera shows us this moment as it actually looks, without Tyler (figures 8 and 9).

⁵⁵ Nancy Bauer, "The First Rule of Fight Club: On Plato, Descartes, and *Fight Club*," in ed. Wartenberg, *Fight Club (Philosophers on Film)*: 112-131, 128.

⁵⁶ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.



Figure 8: Tyler dragging the narrator.



Figure 9: Security camera footage of dragging.

In some moments of this battle, however, the narrator assumes the role of activity, treating Tyler as someone who is *actually* external to himself. He fires the gun outwardly, in the direction of his projected image of Tyler. Of course this accomplishes nothing because, strictly speaking, there *is* no Tyler, and the purely outwardly directed focus of the narrator's attack betrays his persistent misconception of an ontological distinction between the two of them. The narrator can only overcome the dualism of self and Tyler when he embraces the fact that he must become, at one and the same time, active and passive. He accomplishes this when he fires the gun into his own mouth, sending the bullet out the side of his face. This is the decisive moment that effectively terminates the externalization of Tyler's character, establishing the play of activity and passivity within the narrator himself.

With this, he has become a self, and as a result, he is free to embark upon a relationship with Marla. We must note, while Marla is the catalyst for the rupture that launches his path to selfhood, Marla does not play the role of selfless savior to him, nor he to her. Her love does not "fix" him, nor does his fix her. His own complementarity is the condition of his ability to love. The narrator has become a play of passivity and activity, feminine and masculine, that Marla has embodied since we first met her. Thus, it is at precisely this moment that he and Marla join hands, watching the culmination of Project Mayhem's plans unfold. But again, we cannot overstate this, the yin and yang polarity that is embodied in the relationship of the narrator and Marla is *not* restricted to the fact that the two sexes, male and female, have found harmony in a heteronormative relationship. Rather, each character is, by themselves, a complex play of activity and passivity, and it is only for this

reason that they are able to begin a relationship with one another. Thus in the final analysis, despite Tyler's overtly masculinist philosophy, *Fight Club* motions toward a conception of gender fluidity, bordering on ambiguity. This becomes more evident when we look once more to the final scene of the film (Figure 10).



Figure 10: The narrator and Marla hold hands as the credit card buildings collapse.

Earlier we looked to this shot as evidence in favor of the "love story" aspect of the film. But a closer look reveals something else. The narrator has lost his pants in a tense interrogation scene with the police, while beside him, Marla stands in a dress that falls at about her knees, wearing platform shoes that make her approximately equal to him in height. Aside from their slight differences in hairstyle, Marla and the narrator are almost indistinguishable. Nothing clearly marks her as "feminine," nor him as "masculine." This ambiguity derives from the fact that, by the end of the film, both are beings who, to quote Lao Tzu, support yin and embrace yang. This last shot of the film seems to suggest a final, harmonious restoration of balance. Yet, to conclude our reading at this point is to ignore one glaring problem: namely, the fact that this image is broken momentarily by the single-frame insertion of the pornographic image – a close-up of male genitalia – that we had earlier seen Tyler splicing into a family film in his role as theater projectionist. By way of conclusion, let us now address this problem.

VI. THE PHALLUS IN THE MACHINE

I must admit that the reading of *Fight Club* that I have here offered is somewhat counterintuitive, for all the reasons laid out in the outset of this paper – the homoerotic obsession with masculinity, the pervasive violence, Tyler's misogyny, the lack of female characters, etc. But the insertion of the phallus into the final moments of the film is a whole other kettle of fish, because where many of the earlier problematic aspects could arguably be chalked up to a specific character in the film, the final assertion of the phallus is indisputably carried out by David Fincher who apparently, in this moment, adopts the guise of Tyler himself. How can this possibly align with my reading?

In her excellent article, "Hurt So Good: *Fight Club*, Masculine Violence, and the Crisis of Capitalism," Lynn Ta summarizes the problem nicely:

In the final scene, the camera zooms in on Jack and Marla as they grasp hands and watch corporate buildings blow up. As this scene fades into the credits, an image of the penis Tyler had spliced into family films flickers in the same fashion across the screen. The film up to this point has indeed provided a sophisticated and critical diagnosis of male disillusionment, but at the end, heteronormativity and phallic power are once again reinforced. While the crumbling of the phallic-shaped skyscrapers might imply that corporations and consumerism, as they have been erected by men, need to be the new enemies to take down in the battle for masculinity, the reinsertion of the penis at the very end suggests that the phallus, the heteronormative phallus, will continue to overwrite any meaningful gender relations.⁵⁷

For Ta, this moment is singularly problematic, as it undercuts what had, until this point, been an effective critique of masculinism. Her challenge demands a response.

Ben Caplan provides one possible response, that of the “empty self-referential gag.” In his piece, “Never Been Kicked,” he writes:

The intercut image of a penis is a self-referential gag, like showing a changeover dot in the upper right-hand corner of the screen in a scene in which Tyler points to that part of the screen and explains what a changeover dot is ... Sometimes these gags are clues to what is not really real. ... But sometimes they are merely gags ... The intercut image of a penis is, I think, merely one of those gags.⁵⁸

The reality is, I think, more complicated. Clearly the insertion of the phallus in the end is a self-referential nod, and clearly it is a reference to Tyler’s earlier exploits. But the question is not what it *is*, but rather, what it *means*. I think that this subliminal reminder is Fincher’s way of acknowledging a truth that women have known for millennia, and that many men still refuse to accept: that the public sphere is phallically structured and coded, such that patriarchy and masculinism provide the categories and lenses through which most of our public interactions transpire.

Throughout the entirety of the film, Fincher provides numerous indicators that the film is self-consciously an egregious example of the very things that it sets out to critique. First, consider the film’s critique of consumer capitalism. Tyler expresses this anti-consumerist philosophy when he says, “we reject the basic assumption of civilization, especially the importance of material possessions.”⁵⁹ But the film is filled, arguably more so than most other films, with explicit advertisements and close-up images of brand-name goods and corporate labels (figures 11 and 12). And of course, we the viewers recognize that such strategic product placement is necessary in order to defray the extreme financial costs of film-making. So *Fight Club* employs capitalist advertising in its mission of critiquing capitalist consumerism.

⁵⁷ Ta, “Hurt So Good,” 275-276.

⁵⁸ Caplan, “Never Been Kicked,” 147.

⁵⁹ *Fight Club*, Fincher, DVD.



Figure 11: Starbucks Coffee Cup.



Figure 12: Brand-name items in the trash.

Second, the film mocks the objectification of the body, the sort of objectification that one might see in a magazine or film. One prominent example is when we learn Bob's history, that it was his excessive steroid use that resulted in the development of his breasts. Another is when Tyler and the narrator board the bus and ridicule the men in the Gucci advertisement. Yet the film stars Brad Pitt who, in 1999 when the film was released, was one of the preeminent male sex symbols in Hollywood, and the film takes advantage of that fact by putting his shirtless, chiseled body on clear display (figures 13 and 14) a number of times.



Figure 13: Gucci advertisement on bus.



Figure 14: A shirtless Tyler Durden.

Third, going along with the film's critiques of consumption and vanity is a subtle critique of celebrity worship, as when we are given glimpses of the hoarded stacks of what are apparently celebrity magazines, soggy from years of neglect and leaky ceilings (figures 15 and 16).



Figure 15: Stacks of wet magazines.



Figure 16: Close-up of Drew Barrymore cover.

Yet, the film draws direct attention to the centrality of the star power of its cast. In one particularly revealing scene, we are given quick glimpses of two movie theater marquees. One contains the film title, *Seven Years in Tibet*, a film that starred Brad Pitt. The other, far in the background, contains two movie titles: *The Wings of the Dove*, (starring Helena Bonham Carter), and *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, (starring Edward Norton) (figures 17 and 18). Here is another "self-referential gag," but one that is designed to make us aware of the film's

self-consciousness with regard to its complicity in the systems that it seeks to critique.



Figure 17: *Seven Years in Tibet*



Figure 18: *Wings of the Dove* & *The People vs. Larry Flynt*

Finally, the film attempts a critique of “corporate art.” Bob is shot by a police officer while fleeing the scene of one of Project Mayhem’s assigned missions – to destroy a piece of corporate art, as well as a franchise coffee bar. Yet it is difficult to imagine an art form more bound up with corporate bureaucracy and the capitalist calculus than the art of film. *Any* major film, crafted by a skilled and prominent director, starring numerous highly-regarded actors, and distributed by a major studio, requires massive financial investment and, like any major capitalist investment, the shareholders want to ensure the maximum possible return on their investment. However critical it may be of corporate art, *Fight Club* is subject to the same laws. And Fincher gives us no shortage of explicit reminders that what we are watching is, indeed, a *film*. Most salient of these indicators are the repeated fourth-wall breaks on the part of the narrator. But beyond these, we have the movie theater scene, in which the narrator explains to the viewer the technical operation of film projection using multiple reels – the subtle mark in the upper right-hand corner that indicates that it is time to switch reels – at precisely the moment in the film (*Fight Club*) when such an indicator appears. In addition, during his notorious “crap of the world” soliloquy, Tyler looks directly into the camera, as the film strip seems to jostle slightly loose of the reel, reminding us once again that what we are looking at is a film (figures 19 and 20).



Figure 19: Cigarette burns



Figure 20: The all-singing, all-dancing, crap of the world

So to bring this back to the question of the subliminally interjected image of the phallus at the end of the film, it seems probable that it may be one more acknowledgment on the part of Fincher that what we are watching is itself guilty of the very thing that it seeks to critique.

I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this paper that contrary to popular intuitions, *Fight Club* does *not* celebrate or valorize toxic masculinity, misogyny, or violence. It does not, in fact, espouse gender essentialism, much less the traditional embodiment of patriarchal gender roles and relations. It does not embrace Tyler's sexist philosophy that suggests that women are to blame for a supposed "feminization" of modern men. Instead, it attempts a critique of toxic masculinity, and presents a complex and nuanced image of gender, as fluid and constituted by mobile flows and interactions of activities and passivities, embodied by all persons, regardless of their anatomical sex. And yet, make no mistake, *Fight Club* is a piece of corporate art, directed by a white man, centered on the anxieties of mostly white men, starring America's white male quarterback, and manufactured in an industry where mostly white men have ruled, and where they have long exploited, undercompensated, and/or ignored the talent of their female counterparts. Long before the horrific predatory behaviors of Harvey Weinstein became public knowledge, before the explosion of the #MeToo movement, much of which demonstrated the pervasiveness of sexually predatory behaviors in Hollywood, it was true that only four women directors had been nominated for the Academy Award for Best Director, and only one – Kathryn Bigelow –

has ever won.⁶⁰ *Fight Club* attempts to critique toxic masculinity and celebrate a more fluid conception of gender, and yet it does so within a public space and employing a corporate art form that is governed by the logic and the language of masculine domination. If the film's many self-critiques are any indication, the insertion of Tyler's pornographic image in the final moments of the film is not a celebratory reassertion of heteronormativity, but rather, an important reminder and acknowledgement on the part of Fincher that there is still much work to be done.

⁶⁰ In 2017, the fifth, Greta Gerwig, joined the ranks of nominees.