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Fighting Masculinity: Stereotyping as a Signifying Practice in *Fight Club*

When the movie *Fight Club* was released in 1999, it divided critics into roughly two camps; either they perceived the movie as enhancing and glorifying violence and macho masculinity or they saw it as a criticism of the same. Regardless of their position on the movie, most critics saw some kind of satire and social critique directed towards late capitalist society, but disagreed as to the political effectiveness of that critique.

Perhaps the most serious and extreme opposition to *Fight Club* came from the educational theorist Henry Giroux in his article "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: *Fight Club*, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence" (2000) in which he aims to critically address the "representational politics" that structure *Fight Club*" by reading it as a form of "public pedagogy" or "teaching machine" offering comments on "consumerism, masculinity, violence, politics, and gender relations" (5-7). In his attempt to analyze *Fight Club* from this perspective, Giroux draws the conclusion that instead of seriously addressing "important social issues" such as the economic, political and social conditions of capitalism thus offering a "true" critique, "the crisis of capitalism is reduced to the crisis of masculinity" in a consumption culture where men are "allegedly domesticated, rendered passive, soft and emasculated." *Fight Club*, according to Giroux, therefore only ends up reproducing the very problems it attempts to address because it "trivialize[s] them with a stylised aesthetics that revels in irony, cynicism, and excessive violence" (5-6).

Within the context of *Fight Club* and its pedagogical function and politics of representation, I would like to explore the representation of masculinity and its intersection with other themes such as consumerism, violence and femininity within the field of cultural studies such as it is performed by researchers like Stuart Hall.[1] In opposition to Giroux, I am of

the belief that *Fight Club* does not unequivocally strengthen and glorify a cliché masculinity characterized by violence. I also think that it offers a critique of commercialism and late capitalist society as "true" and "valid" as any other form of critique. Consequently, the aim of this article is to show how *Fight Club* challenges commercialism and stereotypical images of masculinity.

The commercially emasculated male

When we meet Jack and Tyler in the opening scene of the film, in a voice-over Jack draws the conclusion that: "Somehow, I realize all of this — the gun, the bombs, the revolution – is really about Marla Singer." This line is sign-posting the fact that a woman or femininity might have something to do with the state of affairs in the scene where Tyler holds Jack at gunpoint.[2] In the following scene, where we are brought back in time to Jack's participation in a self-help group for testicular cancer, it becomes clear that the situation also has to do with a sense of lost masculinity. In this group the men who have lost parts of the physical traits that define them as men, try, despite their "castration", to remain men together as they share their experiences and emotions. Here Jack encounters Bob, a former bodybuilder, who not only was afflicted with testicular cancer as an effect of using steroids, but has also, as a result of hormone treatment, huge breasts or the way Jack puts it, "bitch tits". Thus, in Bob's effort to achieve the well-shaped, muscular body of the commercial ideal male image, his physique has ironically come closer to that of the female body. It is with the help of Bob's female features, his ability to express his emotions in tears, and his enormous breasts, which Jack presses his face against, that Jack, who still has his testicles intact but nevertheless has lost his sense of what it is to be a man, finds a temporary outlet and escape from his misery as a powerless man caught in the trappings of commercial ideals and forces.[3]

Before Jack meets Tyler he defines himself in terms of his material possessions: "Like everyone else, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. ... If I saw something like clever coffee tables in the shape of a yin and yang, I had to have it. ... I would flip through catalogs and wonder, 'What kind of dining set defines me as a person?' We used to read

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[1] Stuart Hall (1997) describes how meaning can be viewed as being produced in a set of practices such as: social interaction, the consumption of cultural objects, the communication through different media (where the most privileged is language), the creation and reception of literature, film, painting and other art forms, which are all systems of representation in that they can be seen as signifying practices. In other words "they are the vehicles or media which *carry meaning* because they operate as *symbols* ..., function as *signs* ... [that] stand for or *represent* our concepts, ideas and feelings in such a way as to enable others to 'read', decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way that we do" (3-5). In this view, culture is conceptualized as a set of signifying practices or signifying systems, "as important as the economic or material 'base' in shaping social subjects and historical events" (6). In accordance with Hall's theories I view *Fight Club* as being part of a cultural circuit where meaning is produced, exchanged and fought over.

[2] *Cf* Peele in "*Fight Club*'s Queer Representations" (2001). In focusing the homoerotic elements of *Fight Club* Peele points out the phallic symbolism in this scene. In line with my analysis, however, he ascribes the film's real center of tension to Marla, not to the homoerotic relationship between Jack and Tyler (863-864).

[3] From this perspective *Fight Club* can be read in parallel to the theory offered in Susan Faludi's *Stiffed* (1999), which roughly speaking claims that the shift from an industrial, manufacturing-based economy to an information-based economy has resulted in fewer occupations where the male body is an "agent of production", and instead has been transformed into a "receptacle for consumption" where the role is to be "ornamental", *ie* to be a beautiful object, active as a citizen only through shopping; something which has caused a masculinity crisis (*cf* Giroux 8 and Chen 2).

pornography. Now it was the Horchow collection". Thus, the protagonist and his activities in *Fight Club* have been relegated to an area that ever since the latter half of the 1800's and the rise of department stores, has been associated with women, namely commercialism and its implied propelling forces: seduction, desire, dreamscape, longing and, as a result, consumption for achievement.

Thus Jack's problem finding his male identity is somehow connected to the concept of femininity.[4] Marla's presence in the self-help group threatens him and soon after her arrival he creates another way out of his zombie-like existence through his encounter with the dangerous, charismatic and highly "masculine" character of Tyler. As Jack feels a need to distance himself from that which he perceives to be feminine, his consumerist life-style and Marla, Tyler becomes increasingly important as a counterweight to Jack's perceived "feminization". The need for distance from 'the feminine' is made explicit when Jack finds himself standing at a virtual crossroads after his apartment has exploded – should he call Marla, and explore a path to possible love? Or Tyler, and choose the way of violence? Jack first calls Marla, but quickly hangs up and calls Tyler instead, setting the stage for the complex Tyler-Jack-Marla dynamic which is at the core of the film.

The macho male

Giroux not only argues that *Fight Club* enhances stereotypical notions of masculinity, but also that it is intensely misogynist in its representation of women (18). The premise for such an interpretation comes, for example, from Jack's and Tyler's dialogue about women: "A generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is the answer we really need", and their destructive relationship to Marla. It is however, important to read these statements and actions in their context, for example in the case of the quote above, Jack and Tyler have just been discussing the absence of their fathers: "I didn't know my dad. Well, I knew him, till I was six. He went and married another woman, had more kids. Every six years or so he'd do it again – a new city, new family". The issue is thus the absence of fathers as role models and the feelings of betrayal, loss, anger and frustration connected to this, not any aversion against women. Jack simply feels that his identity has been shaped by his relationship to his mother and that there might be some other way of being a man.

Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex and castration anxiety can shed some light on the main character's situation. In the film, male castration and castration anxiety are connected to the threat or fear of losing one's masculinity and thereby the ability to "act like a man" (*eg* exercising power

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[4] The yin-and-yang table as well as the reflection on pornography, can be read as sign-posts for the film's depiction of Jack's problems in connection to notions of masculinity and femininity.

through control and individual agency). Castration anxiety is not only present through the testicular cancer group and Bob, but is repeatedly touched upon in the film, as can be seen in the scenes where the members of Project Mayhem threaten to castrate its opponents, the police commissioner and later Jack himself, as they try to stop their activities. In *Fight Club* the absence of the father has led to the absence of the boy's identification with the same and in trying to find a role model, the main character has only had the representations of men in advertising and other media where men are often depicted in accordance with the stereotypical ideal of the masculine man; the detached, active, individual male with a muscular body. And it is this type of masculinity that Jack chooses as he relives the process of the Oedipus complex at an adult age. He has grown up with his mother, desires Marla, but identifies with Tyler because of his fear of castration, or losing his masculinity.

Jack's destructive relationship to Marla derives from his own problems knowing who he is, not with any hatred of women. He is attracted to Marla, but rejects her because in certain respects she reminds him too much of himself. She too is self-destructive, disillusioned and unsatisfied with her life and is clearly looking for an escape from commercial society. In other aspects however, she poses a threat to the emasculated Jack because she is an unconventional, dominant, strong and sexually liberated woman, not ashamed, for example, of the dildo she keeps in her room or uncomfortable about talking dirty during the sex act. In order to be able to handle a relationship to Marla, Jack therefore has to resort to the extreme stereotypical notions of the macho male and the female sex object. Through Tyler he can view Marla's complex character in a one-dimensional light as a stereotypically female sex object - to Tyler she is only "sport fucking" - which enables him to exercise his dominance and stay in control by keeping her at a distance. From this perspective, Marla is the victim of Jack's loss of identity, which, as the film depicts it, is an effect of the commercial society he lives in; in that sense Marla, as well as Jack, is a victim of that same society.

The path to enlightenment

In many ways *Fight Club* shares the same mythological world as traditional myths of descents into the underworld (*eg* the Persephone myth or Dante's *The Divine Comedy*) where the main character travels from earth to hell in order to become enlightened. On a symbolic level the recurring motif of this descent is often about a journey through the psychological unconscious; a journey where the main character is not seldom guided by a teacher or companion like, for example, Virgil in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Jack's journey to the underworld starts with his visits to the different self-help groups. Here he meets the aforementioned Bob, who, like the blind prophet Teiresias in Greek mythology, is half man, half woman. Since the Teiresias-like character of Bob has the gift of making it possible

for Jack to cry, he can be said to represent Jack's first companion on his inner psychological journey from emotional numbness and insomnia to enlightenment. When Jack meets Tyler however, he leaves the self-help groups and Bob, and follows his new imaginary leader who guides him through the underworld of his inner recesses. From this perspective the fight club (located in the dark basement of a bar) and the dirty, dark house on Paper Street with its winding stairs, are all symbols for Jack's dark and taboo-ridden unconscious recesses.

The story of *Fight Club* can thus be read from the perspective of the psychological development of the protagonist. Here the Jungian ideas of the *individuation process*, where the goal for the individual is to reach inner enlightenment and the integration of the archetypes *anima*, the female soul component in the man, and *animus*, the male soul component in the woman, as part of this inner journey can help us elucidate the main character's dilemma.[5] Jung believed that men consciously repress their female characteristics and women their masculine characteristics and that the knowledge that both masculinity and femininity reside within every individual can be frightening and pose a threat to a person's gender identity. In his failure to acknowledge and integrate his female side, here symbolized by Marla, Jack acts out an extreme masculinity and becomes very destructive as he develops a psychosis. Hence, threatened by that which convention has ascribed to femininity, denying his feelings for Marla and rejecting her, Jack chooses to enhance some of the characteristics that have traditionally been attributed to the masculine principle.[6]

Before we witness Jack's meeting with Tyler, *ie* before he is introduced to the audience in the story, Tyler can be seen in brief, single frame flashes where a subliminal advertising technique is used to represent his development in Jack's mind. He occurs for example in the scenes where Jack is at work making photo-copies ("everything is a copy of a copy"), where he goes to the doctor to get a remedy for his insomnia, in one of the support groups as the leader says "really open ourselves up" and following Jack's confrontation with Marla about coming to the support groups, as she walks away Tyler appears. Later, as the story progresses, it becomes explicitly clear that Tyler is part of Jack's psyche. On the basis of this, Tyler, who is a typified surface character, can be read as Jack's *Shadow*. According to Jungian

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[5] Jung's use of *anima* and *animus* and the implications of their meaning have been criticized by many feminists for being based on an essentialist thinking in which women and men are seen as inherently different, but it is of course possible to see these binary oppositions only as a signifying practice influenced by its own historical time. Today the opposites can be regarded as symbolic constructions not stating what is naturally female and male but implying traditional values and gender constructions and their impact on the subject formation of women and men.

[6] In his theories Jung did not attribute any negative meaning to the masculine principle per se. In *Fight Club* however, the masculinity represented is shown in a negative light as a destructive force.

thinking, in the beginning of the individuation process the individual meets the archetypical Shadow figure which symbolizes his/her emotions and other repressed characteristics. From this view, Tyler, who is described as being a night person, could be said to represent Jack's inner dark recesses and his repressed fear, anger and frustration. In *Fight Club*, therefore, what we witness is an ongoing struggle between the forces of femininity/masculinity and order/chaos within Jack. At the same time, since Tyler shares many of the characteristics of the *Trixter* as he constantly crosses the cultural, societal and psychological borders and it is actually through him that Jack achieves some insight into himself and finally gains control over his destructive forces, Tyler can also, within the narrative structure, be interpreted as a Trixter figure that enables individuation and development in letting the individual meet, understand and control the Shadow and that which is taboo in society.

The aesthetics of Fight Club

Although Suzanne Clark in "*Fight Club*: Historicizing the Rhetoric of Masculinity, Violence and Sentimentality" (2001) to a great extent agrees with Giroux's view that *Fight Club* reproduces and enhances that which it purports to challenge, she nevertheless points out that it is possible to argue that the mobilization of gender conventions in the film form an aesthetic where a "satirical edge helps make associations of masculinity and violence more visible and even to critique them" (413, 416). Lucy Chen also directs attention to *Fight Club's* aesthetic in that she describes it as a successful satire and critique on "both the dehumanizing effects of the corporate and consumer culture that forms the backbone of the American Dream, and the absurd excesses of the men's movement" (3). Whereas both Clark and Chen make note of the satirical dimension in connection to the representation of masculinity, they do not, however, attempt to clarify how the critical satire works on an aesthetical level. In order to comprehend *Fight Club* properly from the perspective of my analysis, it is essential to explore its aesthetic form in more depth.

At first glance, the male body in *Fight Club* seems to be burdened with the task of symbolizing a commercial, conventional and superficial masculinity. But instead of fixing a conventional gender ideology, *Fight Club*, through the application and repetition of stereotypical representations of masculinity, puts the stereotypes employed in a critical light, thus questioning the problems and limitations they cause in the protagonist's life. The binary oppositions and stereotypical images are set in play in relation to each other. A distance is created between the audience and that which is represented by the surreal, nightmarish atmosphere, the highly stylized and exaggerated characters, the recurrent self-reflexivity such as the breaking of the fourth wall, metafictional elements, parody, irony and satire, thus making the stereotypes strange or de-familiarized (*cf*

Shklovskian defamiliarization or Brechtian *Verfremdung* techniques). At the same time as this "making strange" signals a need for a reading on a connotative level, it also counteracts an unproblematized identification between the members of the audience and the characters and actions taking place in the story. The distance created is characterized by the pungent quality of irony and satire that provides a critique of the stereotypes depicted.[7] Hence, the conventional stereotypes are used in a self-reflexive signifying practice in order to challenge the stereotypes from inside. *Fight Club* thereby makes use of a signifying practice similar to the one Stuart Hall describes in *Representation* as a counter-strategy that tries to challenge the stereotypes from within the signifying system itself. This type of strategy, according to Hall, does not focus so much on introducing new content as on the form of representations as it "positively takes the [stereotypically depicted] body as the principal site of its representational strategies, attempting to make the stereotypes work against themselves" thereby making "elaborate play with 'looking', hoping by its very attention, to 'make it strange' – that is, to de-familiarize it, and so make explicit what is often hidden … " (274). In line with this signifying practice *Fight Club* makes use of the stereotype of the macho male in order to make explicit its correlation to, and reinforcement by, the advertising industry and also its hindrance of the main character's full personal development.

Violence

In his state of living dead and his search for masculinity, the path Jack chooses to take through Tyler leads him back to an extremely primal masculinity characterized by violence. Although literally speaking, *Fight Club* is about fighting and the attitude behind it as the men try to reclaim their masculinity through the stereotypically male act of violence, the violence in the film is not about pure aesthetic entertainment or violence for violence's sake, but has more to do with the sensation of feeling alive in a society where people have become emotionally numb and spiritually hollow. Before Jack meets Tyler he is caught up in commercial forces (for example he works in a corporate insurance company and his identity lies in his role as consumer), suffers from insomnia and attends self-help groups in order to experience catharsis through the suffering of other people. After

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[7] In the present study *satire* is defined in accordance with Hayden White as narrative irony (1973). Hutcheon works with a postmodern irony concept that is compatible to the irony at play in *Fight Club*. She views irony as a communicative process where two or more meanings are played out against each other. Characteristic for this process is that a) the ironical meaning is context bound and works between people in *interpretive communities* (a community of readers that share a set of interpretive strategies in common. See footnote 10 for a further discussion), b) the said and the unsaid create new meanings together which are often endowed with a critical edge (1995: 58ff, 105).

their first fight, Jack and Tyler with "their eyes glazed with endorphin-induced serenity" feel truly alive. In a psychological state of self-destructiveness the characters inflict pain on each other in the organized fight clubs in order to obliterate the psychological pain of the emotional numbness they experience: "After fight club, everything else in your life gets the volume turned down. You can deal with anything", psychological pain thus being remedied with physical pain.

In her article "*Fight Club*: the most Dangerous Movie Ever?" (2001) Stefanie Remlinger is also of the view that the violence in *Fight Club* is motivated by the frustration caused by the commercial society. In the self-destructive acts of violence she sees an opposition to the tenets of consumer culture. That the men's bodies are the sites of this struggle is only fitting according to Remlinger, since the body is "a center of attention in today's consumer culture" (145). The bodily injuries are interpreted as "signs of protest as well as real damages to the 'body economic'… Through hurting themselves the men destroy human capital, they refuse to be of service or to function efficiently" (147). Tyler, who is a perfect image of a commercial male ideal, could consequently be said to use violence in order to destroy the very same stereotypical male ideal: "Self-improvement is masturbation. Self-destruction is the answer." The violence in *Fight Club* is therefore not gratuitous but a symptom of an underlying societal malaise connected to the commercial/corporate system and its negative effect on people that the film shows, questions and critiques. Seen in this light, the film explores the powerlessness of the young individual always having to strive for the unachievable, which the commercial system has promised him/her to achieve, such as great success and happiness. The realization that this is not always what life has to offer might lead to an extreme frustration and anger that can create a beast like Tyler Durden:

> I see in fight club the strongest and smartest men who have ever lived – an entire generation pumping gas and waiting tables; or they're slaves with white collars. Advertisements have them chasing cars and clothes, working jobs they hate so they can buy shit they don't need. We are the middle children of history, with no purpose or place. We have no great war, or great depression. The great war is a spiritual war. The great depression is our lives. We were raised by television to believe that we'd be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars – but we won't. And we're learning that fact. And we're very, *very* pissed-off.

Although on a surface level, the violence advocated by Tyler may at first seem to posit some salvation for the men, as the movie proceeds it becomes clear that it has not offered a constructive solution to the problems presented (*cf* Remlinger 148-150). On the contrary, what *Fight Club* shows by exploring this notion, is that primitive and typically masculine activities like bare-knuckled fist fights do not represent a valid alternative of being a man today. In connection to this, the film can even be read as a parody and satire

of the men's movement as it is represented by, for example, Robert Bly, where the agenda for men is to reclaim their masculine identity by coming into contact with their primal and savage instincts, which are based on traditional notions of masculinity in the sense of the hunter-gatherer society (*cf* Chen 3).[8]

Project Mayhem

Just like the primitive male ideal Tyler represents, his ideal world is also characterized by a nostalgic longing back to a primitive agrarian society:

> In the world I see – you're stalking elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. You will wear leather clothes that last you the rest of your life. You will climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. You will see tiny figures pounding corn and laying strips of venison on the empty car pool lane of the ruins of the super highway.

Through the nationwide anarchist organization of "Project Mayhem", Tyler's goal is to blow up banks and credit card companies in order to "erase the debt record so that everything can go back to zero." By doing this he feels he can liberate people from the "tyranny" of capitalism. The alternative that Tyler represents, however, is not based on democratic values but instead on a fascist leadership.

Whereas Giroux reads the movie as promoting and glamorizing the kind of fascism that Tyler represents, I am of the opinion that the movie instead shows the failings with Tyler's naïve ideas and dangerous, destructive actions. What to Jack initially seems to be a tenable alternative in Tyler and his beliefs, as the film progresses, is later revealed as a destructive flaw which does not at all offer a sound solution to Jack's problems (*cf* Remlinger 148-151). The first sign of Jack turning against that which Tyler represents is when Tyler aims a gun at Raymond, a clerk, in order to make him choose what he really wants in life, to become a veterinarian – an incident which makes Jack feel ill at ease. But even though this so-called 'human sacrifice' (which becomes part of the home assignments that Tyler hands out to the participants in Fight Club in order to train them for the coming project Mayhem) is too much for Jack, he is still taken in by Tyler's charisma and tries as long as possible to see the logic behind

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[8] As stated by Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody*, parody is a textual structure that connects to the world outside through irony and satire. Satire is described as being directly connected to social conditions in society. In different ways and to different degrees Hutcheon argues that parody and satire overlap with each other (1985: 52f). According to Genette in his *Palimpsestes* (1982), translated in part by Johan Öberg in "Den allvarsamma parodin" (1990), the mode of parody ranges from a) a strict playful stylistic transformation to the more b) questioning ironic and c) the critical satirical.

Tyler's plans: "You had to give it to him. He had a plan. … The plan started to make sense in a Tyler sort of way." This far the audience, just like Jack, might perceive Tyler as a cool charismatic guy and therefore to some extent identify with him, *ie* we see him the same way as Jack does, but when the fight club has turned into Project Mayhem and Tyler and his unquestioning followers have blown up parts of a corporate building (the explosion forming the pattern of a smiley face on the façade) Jack and the audience with him start to question Tyler's ideas more and more. When Bob later gets killed on a mission, Jack is really shaken and breaks from his Tyler inclinations. In the crucial scene where Bob's dead body is brought to the Paper street house, the idea of fascism is explicitly parodied and satirized. This is when the men, all with shaved heads and dressed in black uniforms, in the sheer stupidity of blind followers, try to make sense of Jack's/Tyler's sudden rule breaking (Jack calls Bob by his real name; something which is not allowed in Project Mayhem) and draw the conclusion that in death a member has a name, after which they repeat in unison "his name was Robert Paulsen, his name was Robert Paulsen…". These men's blindly listening to Tyler's ideas only reflect how easily blinded and influenced people can be by authoritarian systems and voices, and it is not difficult to draw a parallel to the impact that the commercial society and its advertising catchwords in general have on people.

Jack's final turning point comes when he realizes that Tyler poses a threat to Marla. As Marla has come to know the true state of affairs – that Jack has a split personality – the Tyler side of him fears that he might lose control over her, thereby losing his masculine identity and possibility of acting in Tyler manner, *ie* Marla, being a woman and representing femininity poses a threat to the whole existence of Tyler and Project Mayhem because if Jack opts for Marla and thereby on a symbolic level chooses to pursue an integration between that which convention calls masculine and feminine, there is no room for Tyler anymore. That femininity does not have a place in Tyler's view of the world is also implied by the fact that the "feminised" Bob, a man that is not "really" a man, becomes the only casualty in Project Mayhem. Tyler's threat to Marla's safety thus represents the instance when Jack really draws the line and tries to gain control over his Tyler persona because he cares about Marla and realizes that Tyler's ways are not an option; and so Jack's desire for intimacy is redirected to Marla after his inner journey of self-discovery. In order to free himself from his Tyler tendencies, Jack shoots himself and thereby Tyler. He has finally realized his split personality and the wrongful behavior and actions he is responsible for, *ie* he has reached enlightenment: "My eyes are open".

The ending

Fight Club's ending is ambiguous or open; there is no clear-cut victory where we know for certain that everything is going to be all right. It is

however clear that the main character realizes the destructiveness and non-productiveness in choosing an extreme macho male position and fascist way of dealing with life after his encounter with Tyler. He has come to understand that he has to accept and integrate both his "masculine" and "feminine" personality traits and as he does so, he is no longer scared of letting Marla into his life. As long as he couldn't handle his own sense of self, it was impossible for him to relate to a woman in a non-destructive way. So on this note, the ending is quite positive with Jack and Marla together ready to enter the future no matter what it holds for them (*cf* Chen 13). However, through Tyler's spliced-in single-frame penis at the end, the film reminds us that it might not be an easy task for the two of them as the presence of Tyler, still lurking around the corner, implies that Jack by no means has fully succeeded in finding out who he really is as a man and human being.

Conclusion and discussion

In contrast to Giroux's conviction that *Fight Club* enhances and glorifies that which it depicts, the present analysis shows that the representation of masculinity in *Fight Club* does not unequivocally strengthen conventional and stereotypical images of what it is to be a man, but rather that the film questions and critiques the same, even though it does not present an alternative way out (*cf* Remlinger 152).

Although Giroux, in his reading of *Fight Club*, claims that his purpose is not to moralize about the politics of the movie, that is nevertheless what his reading ends up doing since according to him, for a film to be political in the "right" sense, it has to offer some kind of clear-cut solution to the depicted situation/problem. As he cannot find this in *Fight Club* he accuses it of being part of a "broader neoliberal backlash against equity, social citizenship, and human rights" (25).[9] I think that the negativity on behalf of Giroux might be a symptom of his own unwillingness to understand the film on a deeper, more connotative level. In Giroux's focus on proving his preconceived notions that films such as *Fight Club* cannot offer a valid critique of social structures, he fails to interpret the film in its entirety or from within its own fictional logic. For example, he comments only briefly on the last 1/3 of the movie, *ie* from the point at which the protagonist begins to question and criticize Tyler's ideas and actions, and that being the case can only see this repudiation as superficial and disingenuous (*cf* 12,18). Furthermore he ignores the idea that *Fight Club* challenges that which it depicts, not by giving new meaning to the significance of

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[9] *Cf* Remlinger who comes to the conclusion that the fact that *Fight Club* does not follow a pattern of black and white where it is easy to differ between the good guys and the bad guys, could be the reason why certain critics react so negatively to the film (152).

masculinity - it does not offer any alternatives or truth claims as to what it is to be a man - but by using the counter-strategy of challenging stereotypical notions of masculinity from within it opens up for a possible new meaning that we as members of the audience have to give our own form to. The effectiveness of a strategy such as the signifying practice of stereotyping presupposes a shared knowledge of rules, conventions and expectations at play in a specific context (*cf* Hutcheon 1995: 89, 92-93). Giroux's failure to acknowledge this signifying process implies that his reading could be affected by contextual factors such as the norms of the interpretive community that he belongs to and thereby the interpretative strategies he makes use of.[10]

Moreover, Giroux does not have much confidence in the audience's capacity to read *Fight Club* on anything but a denotative surface level where the violence portrayed can only lead to the viewers being affected in a negative way. This is characteristic for what has been called *media* or *moral panics, ie* where adult experts – for example teachers, literary critics *etc* define "popular" or "mass" culture as a moral threat to society and to particularly young people.[11] Among the presuppositions for such a position can be the notion that there is a direct link between the individual person's exposure to *eg* a movie and that same person's actions. Children and young people are perceived as victims who are especially susceptible to popular/mass culture's temptations. Sometimes, however, moral panics hide a generational conflict, which has to do with the right to define what is good and bad within the cultural field (Persson 30-31).[12]

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[10] According to Stanley Fish and his theory of *interpretive communities* (a community of readers that share "a set of interpretive strategies in common") the different meanings readers make are based on "the theories or beliefs about meaning and about texts that they hold to be true", *ie* the meanings that readers ascribe to a text depend on the interpretive community which they belong to (Groden and Kreiswirth online). The problem with this theory is, of course, the impossibility to concrete establish the existence of interpretive communities. Nevertheless, the theory makes possible a notion about contextual factors that form the base for the meaning production in interpretation. Whereas Fish's interpretive community tends to lead to a sociological investigation which puts focus on the existence or non-existence of interpretive communities, Hutcheon's (1995) idea of *discursive communities* (close in meaning to Fish's interpretive community) also includes an interest in the individual reader and his/her interpretation within the interpretive community.

[11] The term *moral panic* is widely attributed to Stanley Cohen and his sociological investigation of the subcultural groups the Mods and the Rockers in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics. The Creation of Mods and Rockers* (1972).

[12] In a forthcoming project, which continues and develops my reading of *Fight Club,* I intend to explore the reception of the movie in order to clarify how it has actually been received, not only by scholarly critics but also by members of the "ordinary" audience. Websites and discussion groups on the internet make such an investigation possible. By performing a reception study I want to present a nuanced picture of the reception where important contextual factors such as the formations of different interpretive communities and differing interpretive strategies are taken into account.

A more fruitful approach to *Fight Club* can be found in Geoffrey Sirc's "The Difficult Politics of the Popular" (2001) where he resists the urge to impose on his students his own preferred ideology and instead tries to comprehend why they find the film politically interesting and intellectually substantive (424). Sirc, among other things, reaches the conclusion that his students who are part of what he calls "the post-*Simpsons*, post-*Southpark* generation" prefer a disturbing and politically ambiguous work before a black-and-white film that offers clear-cut answers (426). He also touches upon the fact that the students' reading strategies differ from his own and other politically progressive academics such as Giroux in that they read *Fight Club* as a subversive film that directs a critique towards that which it depicts.

In this essay, I have entered the cultural circuit and the struggle of meaning by reading *Fight Club* on the basis of my perceptions and experiences. I have shown that *Fight Club* is not a one-dimensional action movie which glorifies violence and a negative masculinity but rather that it subverts that which it depicts. In contrast to Giroux's analysis, largely grounded in his preconceived moral notions, I have performed an analysis where the objective has been to understand the meaning production of the film within its own fictional logic. Though I disagree with Giroux, I readily acknowledge the fact that cultural practices are read differently by different audiences and that conflicting readings such as Giroux's and my own only show how difficult and slippery the practice of representation can be.

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