

"A Generation of Men Without History": *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom

[Krister Friday](#)



© 2003
PMC 13.3

1. There is a brief but suggestive moment in Chuck Palahniuk's popular novel, *Fight Club*, in which the first-person, unnamed narrator describes how Tyler Durden splices tiny pornographic frames into film reels. In the scene (dramatized in David Fincher's largely faithful cinematic adaptation of the novel), the narrator describes how Tyler, working as a projectionist at a public theater, comes to splice the image of an erection into a family film:

You're a projectionist and you're tired and angry, but mostly you're bored so you start by taking a single frame of pornography collected by some other projectionist that you find stashed away in the booth, and you splice this frame of a lunging red penis or a yawning wet vagina close-up into another feature movie.

This is one of those pet adventures, when the dog and the cat are left behind by a traveling family and must find their way home. In reel three, just after the dog and cat, who have human voices and talk to each other, have eaten out of a garbage can, there's the flash of an erection. Tyler does this. (29-30)

Significant in its brevity, this recollected scene comes as close as any in encapsulating *Fight Club*'s narrative logic and its complex, imaginative imbrication of identity and historical self-consciousness.

2. For what Tyler inserts is a single, subliminal frame that represents a moment of masculine prowess. It flickers for an instant, barely registered, before leaving an afterimage that lingers in the (future) memories of the audience. In sequence and out of sequence, fleeting and memorable, framed and frameless, the afterimage serves as the phallic signature of the novel's charismatic and mischievous anti-hero--and as such as an appropriate emblem for the text's conception of masculine identity in late-twentieth-century American culture. Much like Tyler's subliminal insertion, *Fight Club* avers and projects a masculine identity it sees as both revolutionary and evanescent, an identity whose arrogated

transience raises several questions regarding its historical lineaments and periodic framing. Why is this projection necessary? To whom is it addressed? Not from where, but from *when* does Tyler insert his image, and against what or when is that image, identity, and time visible? How is the constitutive, performative relationship between identity, narrative, and temporal assertion to be understood? In raising these questions through its narrative and its narrative structure, *Fight Club* provides one example in contemporary postmodern fiction of how the dynamics of identity formation, the logic of narrative, and the antinomies of historical periodization can be conflated--governed as they are by the same impossible, tautological logic.

3. In the form of a pornographic intrusion, Tyler's subliminal frame suggests that *Fight Club* will code its masculinity in terms of the scandalous and the prohibited, an assumed identity-position that is coincidentally confirmed by at least one hostile reading of the film (and by extension, the novel's) construction of masculinity.¹ Moreover, as a fleeting afterimage, one framed as a recollected moment, the pornographic frame "exists" in the diegesis of *Fight Club* as a twice-removed ontology--as a memory of something that *must have persisted* in a (remembered) audience's memory. Prohibited and temporally removed, this moment of masculine prowess is deliberately projected and framed as the marginal, as the erased, as a form of identity that is as imperiled as it is transient.
4. Indeed, the excess suggested by Tyler's pornographic emblem is realized in *Fight Club's* conspicuous, if not exaggerated, theme of besieged and waning masculinity. Early in the narrative, when the unnamed, first-person narrator consults a doctor because of unrelenting insomnia, he is given advice that can be seen as paradigmatic for the text's overt interest in masculine affliction and its etiology: "Insomnia is just the symptom of something larger. Find out what's actually wrong. Listen to your body" (19). What the narrator discovers, of course, is that this "something larger" is a crisis of masculinity in contemporary American culture--a crisis that produces conspicuous symptoms and necessitates even more conspicuous remedies.
5. An insurance adjuster jaded with work and his own endless consumer consumption ("what kitchen set defines me as a person?" he wonders sardonically in Fincher's film), the sleep-deprived narrator attends a series of support groups for the terminally ill, begins a vexed relationship with fellow support-group addict Marla Singer, and eventually meets Tyler Durden, a charismatic soap salesman and iconoclastic mischief-maker and eventual terrorist. The narrator and Tyler Durden seduce and then rebuff Marla, discover a taste for late-night, masochistic, bare-knuckled brawling between men, and start an underground boxing network as deliberate compensation for the emasculating effects of white-collar work and culture. According to the narrator, "You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive in *Fight Club*" (51). Under Tyler's

leadership the fight clubs acquire an underground popularity leading to their transformation into a more politicized, revolutionary movement: Project Mayhem, a series of escalating disruptions aimed at businesses, consumer consumption, and the financial system itself. Eventually, the narrator, along with first-time readers/viewers, discovers that Tyler Durden is merely the narrator's alter ego.

6. Both the novel and the film are structured by an extended flashback with the narrator, holding a gun in his mouth, explaining how he met "Tyler," joined and then resisted both fight club and Project Mayhem, and now finds himself, at the close of the frame, engaged in struggle with "Tyler" in a financial building wired with Tyler's bombs. In the novel, the narrator awakes to find himself in a mental institution after having shot himself, and in the film, the narrator shoots himself before reuniting with Marla as the bombs detonate across the financial district.

7. As this narrative summary reveals, the wounding and masochism of *Fight Club* are key to the text's construction of masculine identity, making *Fight Club* another example of what Sally Robinson has identified as a "dominant or master narrative of white male decline" prevalent in post-sixties, white-male American fiction (2). Robinson argues that such narratives construct a notion of male victimization and its related symptomology as redress for a perceived political and social emasculation--a way of compensating for a sense of disempowerment created by a contemporary culture in which the white male no longer occupies a central, unchallenged, normative position. In the context of the cumulative "threats" of identity politics, minority gains in the academy and in the workplace, the decline of single wage-earner households, and a waning of the white male's monopoly on political power, these narratives have sublated the aforementioned cultural shifts into a new identity position--the embattled underdog and/or victim. In this way, Robinson argues, these narratives of decline allow white men to "mark" themselves as distinctive, even if that "marking" is only the dialectical obverse of an already eroding identity position. In *Fight Club*, this marking is achieved through the narrative's compensatory trajectory. In the juxtaposition of male physicality and male bonding as a revolutionary alternative to emasculating white-collar work, enervating consumer culture, and even vexing heterosexual relationships, *Fight Club* certainly stages a narrative of "white male decline," but it is a narrative in which an atavistic notion of masculinity (i.e., one based on fist-fighting and terrorism) is first recovered and then offered the chance to regain its efficacy and reconstitute itself through revolutionary action.

8. More importantly, as a biographical flashback of male decline and re-emergence, *Fight Club* is a narrative of identity, one that explains how the narrator came to be; how a certain identity ("Tyler") emerges and comes to recognize itself; how the narrator, with the help of "Tyler," acquires his "revolutionary" consciousness; and how, ultimately, the narrator "now" finds

himself with a gun in his mouth. This retrospective structure is foregrounded by the dramatic frame of *Fight Club*, raising the broader and much more important question of the constitutive relationship between identity and narrative history. For the narrator's flashback is a history of sorts, and as such it offers an example of the traditional logic of cause and effect that underwrites historical knowledge, especially biography: *I am what I am because of what I was, what I did, and what happened to me*. Told in retrospect, histories offer accounts of the past, and these accounts are inherently (but sometimes only implicitly) teleological, explaining, as they do, the present. That is why it is a commonplace to say that all (narrative) histories, including *Fight Club*, are primarily expressions *of* the present and *for* the present, and its condition, and its identity.²

9. To be effective, linear, historical narratives must negotiate between temporal sameness and temporal difference, perpetually oscillating between the two. In order to allow historical transitions to be recognized as such, there must be qualitative differences between beginning and end, or between past and present. Without transition, there cannot be linear history. This means that in traditional histories--especially histories that justify or explain a certain distinctiveness of period, culture, or nation--the present and its uniqueness must be both present *and* absent in its own historical record or tradition. Similarly, an identity with a narrative history of its origins must be, quite simply, external *and* internal to its own temporal antecedents and matrices. This identity must be present in the sense that all its constitutive events or elements are now, in retrospect, seen as expressions or harbingers of the same, but identity must also be absent from its past, insofar as its uniqueness came to be and (necessarily) emerged from difference.³
10. This same logic is foregrounded in *Fight Club*'s singular, biographical flashback, but it is precisely this oscillation between temporal difference and sameness that *Fight Club*'s narrative both needs and jeopardizes, as if the masochism contained in the text's theme emanates into an openly self-defeating narrative logic. Although *Fight Club*'s biographical structure offers an account in which a schizophrenic identity (i.e., "Tyler") develops and comes to recognize itself (an account in which the present condition is the cumulative effect of the past), in truth the narrative and its frame, (i.e., the diegetic past and present), are, qualitatively speaking, too similar. They are, ultimately, equivalent expressions of the same condition, the same identity, and the same time. This is inevitable, for the simple reason that biography, like other narrative forms of history, suffers from a fundamental tautology. As Tony Myers explains, the oscillation between sameness and difference is integral to history, but it collapses because the interest of the present inevitably appropriates the past as an extension of itself:

history becomes less a putatively
disinterested account of the past, than a
project of concatenation which yokes

together the past, present, and future in a seamless flow leading to some form of enlightenment. Whether from the point of view of the "moment" of enlightenment or that of the present itself, then, history so conceived becomes a variety of *hysteron proteron*, ceaselessly maladaptating the other to itself and finding only that which it is able to impute in the first place. (35)

In other words, history succumbs under the logic of the same in which the "present" extends and consumes the historical horizon, making history merely a "record of its own inscription, a record that, of course, then succumbs to its own inscription, and so in a vertiginous thrall to the present" (Myers 34).

11. This tautological relationship between present and narrative past has been well-rehearsed, especially in modern and postmodern conceptions of history, and it is certainly not an exclusive insight offered by a text like *Fight Club*. However, by casting its biographical flashback as a schizophrenic's narrative, *Fight Club* foregrounds the way any history, pressed into service as support for identity, is necessarily both schizophrenic and tautological in the way it figures temporal sameness and difference and in the way it accounts for the fact that narratives about identity and its origins must, according to Žižek, "overlook the way our act [of recollection, of analysis] is already part of the state of things we are looking at" (*Sublime* 59). So, for example, in order for *Fight Club*'s flashback to maintain the appearance of a teleological development in which a "new" identity emerges, the flashback cannot be Tyler's at all. It must "belong" to another, to an unnamed narrator who serves as the precursor or precondition for Tyler's emergence. What is a first-person narration must be disavowed--projected as it were--into the third person. Despite this, the biography is, ultimately, Tyler's biography; it is the biography of a schizophrenic, albeit one who knows, at the beginning of the frame, that he and Tyler are the same: "I know this because Tyler knows this," he reveals at the beginning of the frame (12). Tyler doesn't "emerge" through a narrative sequence or linear flashback; he is present (present in his own past, so to speak) from the very beginning, even if that "presence" must be denied. In retrospect then, the very existence of this narrative flashback--a narrative that must deny its true presuppositions in order to read like at history at all--is merely a symptom, a narrative index or a narrative testimony to Tyler's present condition and existence.
12. Indeed, a closer examination of Tyler's biography reveals that the frame--the "present" in which the gun is inserted into the mouth--and the historical "explanation" that is the flashback are both simply expressions of the same condition. Although *Fight Club*'s narrative trajectory suggests, at first glance, that the crisis of male identity is something that is overcome through a redemptive recovery of male prowess and the development of revolutionary consciousness, the narrative only leads up to a "present" condition--

captured in the opening and closing frame--of continued helplessness and the related sense that any male identity that exists is simultaneously on the brink of extinction, not emergence. Moreover, Project Mayhem is a movement that stresses the subordination of individual identity to the collective goal of destroying contemporary consumer culture and "blast[ing] the world free from History" (124). As such, its development represents a dialectical reversal whereby agency and identity (the fight clubs where "You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive [there]") engender their own negation (Project Mayhem). In Project Mayhem, the narrator explains, individual identity exists only retrospectively: "only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes" (178). In essence, Project Mayhem is a movement that subsumes the identity of the individual subject (including Tyler Durden himself) and acquires an internal momentum beyond the control of the individual. Once he realizes that Marla Singer might be in danger and that the movement will inevitably kill thousands, the narrator tries to stop "Tyler" and Project Mayhem, but he fails. The movement, it seems, has grown beyond him.

13. Ironically, although it is a movement that aspires to destroy "every scrap of History" (12) and secure a new identity for its participants and adherents, the genesis of Project Mayhem is itself an atavistic, compressed recapitulation of the familiar rhetorics and ideologies of western political history: demagoguery, fascism, and the class politics of the infamous communist parties. Despite the promise of a new, emergent masculine identity that becomes conflated with revolutionary rhetoric, Project Mayhem offers only the same masculine identity positions--the "scrap[s] of history"--it sought to sublimate. As the fight clubs grow in popularity, Tyler's cult status grows, and the fight clubs quickly evolve into an incipient movement structured around Tyler's fascist-like cult of personality--complete with rules, uniforms, acolytes, militaristic overtones, and a "cell" structure. Eventually, the movement adopts the collective goal of class warfare and revolution, reducing each man to an instrument of the project's collective will. As Tyler Durden explains, "no one guy understands the whole plan, but each guy is trained to do one simple task perfectly" (130).

14. All of this should suggest that despite appearances to the contrary, *Fight Club* is not a teleological narrative. It cannot locate the temporal difference that underwrites its central claim: masculine prowess is an identity or condition that came to be, that is part of the evolution of Tyler Durden. In fact, all that *Fight Club* represents is the (narrative) circularity of the one condition that remains constant as a source of identity: masochism. Is the masochistic, male violence that informs the practices of the fight clubs a palliative, a vehicle to a new identity (*You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive in Fight Club*), or is it merely another symptom of the powerlessness and crisis of identity it is supposed to redeem? That fact that the fight clubs eventually lose their appeal and are sublated into Project Mayhem suggests that the masochistic

violence that informs the fight clubs is merely another symptom to be overcome, another obstacle on the path to an authentic--and stable--male identity. In fact, as the narrator confesses, "You can build up a tolerance to fighting, and maybe I needed to move up to something bigger" (123). Moreover, the fact that Project Mayhem "culminates," narratively speaking, in the closing frame in which Tyler inserts a gun into his mouth and shoots himself suggests that Project Mayhem is no different from the masochistic fight clubs it purportedly transcended. Ultimately, the culmination of Project Mayhem is merely another act of masochism and therefore, according to the aforementioned logic, merely another symptom. The collapse of the difference between frame and flashback, which is also the collapse between present and past, means that there is nothing, qualitatively speaking, beyond the symptom that is masochism. Although the narrator of *Fight Club* is advised to locate "something larger" beyond his symptoms, there is no redemptive meaning, no otherness to the symptom that can underpin a new identity for the narrator. Simply put, in *Fight Club*, symptom and its redress are one and the same, just as Tyler and the narrator and beginning and end are all the same.

15. This tautology--Tyler is the narrator, the beginning is the end, redress is the symptom--means that in effect, there is no temporal difference in *Fight Club*'s narrative. There is only the existence of a singular, a priori, masochistic condition that has no real temporal context or coordinates outside of its own act of self-assertion. Like Tyler's pornographic splicing in the movie theater, this identity as symptom must be inserted into a (narrative) sequence in order to arrogate the ontology and "appearance" of a masculine identity at all. This act shows how narratives like *Fight Club*'s flashback are always, so to speak, "after the fact." They do not so much explain a condition as they justify or compensate for the condition's inherent contradictions or impossible premises. As Žižek points out, "narrative as such emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative which bears witness to some repressed antagonism" (*Plague* 11). In the case of *Fight Club*, this "repressed antagonism" is the fact that the masculine identity celebrated in the text is a performative tautology--one that takes its own act of self-assertion as proof of its "history" and its own ontological and temporal consistency. The logic of *Fight Club*'s narrative is precisely this circularity, one that says, *I became who I am because of my symptoms, but my symptoms are (already) who I am*. However, like Tyler's act of cinematic sabotage--one that requires a theater, a sequence, and a screen--the notion of masculinity averred by *Fight Club* is similarly in need of completion: it needs first to create, and then be projected into, a temporal context. It needs, in other words, both a time and, eventually, a history in order to become visible to itself.
16. The logic of *Fight Club*'s central symptom, masochism, raises the question of this temporal/historical dimension to identity, and it shows how *Fight Club* is much more than a reactionary assertion of

masculine, gender politics. As we have seen, the collapse between identity and symptom is both necessary and inevitable, because it is through the symptom that the subject comes to be at all. *At least I am a subject who has/needs this*, the subject seems to say through his/her symptoms, and according to Lacan, this logic explains why the subject "loves his symptom more than himself" and will cling to it even after it has been interpreted and explained (away) in analysis.⁴ But the embrace of masochism is itself a temporally indeterminant logic, based as it is on abeyance, postponement, and anticipation. As Deleuze explains in his classic reading of Sacher-Masoch, masochism is a relationship to a pleasure that has not yet come:

The masochist waits for pleasure as something that is bound to be late, and expects pain as the condition that will finally ensure (both physically and morally) the advent of pleasure. He therefore postpones pleasure in expectation of the pain that will make gratification possible. The anxiety of the masochist divides therefore into an indefinite awaiting of pleasure and an intense expectation of pain.
(63)

In *Fight Club*, the "pleasure" of masochism is associated with the new masculine identity it seemingly affords Tyler and his followers (*You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive in Fight Club*). By extension, we can say that this masochism, the very support for Tyler's identity, is itself an empty form without content: it is an expectation of *an identity that is to come*. What *Fight Club* offers, in conflating identity as symptom, is a conception of identity in which abeyance and expectation become themselves the positive support for white male identity.

17. Nothing underscores the way anticipation itself becomes the form of identity so much as the frame of the narrative itself, a frame which "prolongs" the masochistic act in diegetic time, subordinates all narrative events to itself, and suggests, through these formal indices, that masochism *as a process* is both the beginning and the end of *Fight Club*'s narrative construction of identity.⁵ As a flashback "leading" to the present, *Fight Club* betrays the linearity of its narrative form and instead "display[s] the most intense preoccupation with arrested movement" (Deleuze 62) as its notion of identity becomes, in effect, the wait for identity.
18. In this logic of masochism, it is the future itself that becomes the source of this (absent) meaning of identity, just as in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the inherent logic of the symptom points to the future as the context for the symptom's interpretation. Although they are "meaningless traces" (*Sublime* 56) in and of themselves, symptoms presuppose their own interpretation and at least offer the promise, however illusory, that they will be read definitively. As such, the symptom is conceptualized by Lacanians as a message

that appeals to the future:

The symptom arises where the world failed, where the circuit of the symbolic communication was broken: it is a kind of 'prolongation of communication by other means'; the failed, repressed word articulates itself in a coded, ciphered form. The implication of this is that the symptom can not only be interpreted but is, so to speak, already formed with an eye to its interpretation: it is addressed to the big Other presumed to contain its meaning. In other words, there is no symptom without its addressee: in the psychoanalytic cure the symptom is always addressed to the analyst, it is an appeal to him to deliver its hidden meaning. (*Sublime* 73)

Of course, one of the fundamental Lacanian insights is that "the big Other does not exist": there is no inherent meaning to the symptom; no self-grounding, signifying logic that can irrevocably redeem it; and most importantly, no final authority or context that can account for and contain all its iterations as instances of the same.⁶

Nevertheless, despite the Lacanian insistence on the metonymic "slippage" of meaning (and by extension, identity), the identification with the symptom is also a way of presuming or positing just the opposite; it is a way of arrogating at least the promise of such a proper symbolic context for identity even where there is none. Identifying with the symptom is thus a way of misrecognizing the symptom's inherent metonymy, ignoring the fact that ultimately "perhaps a symptom...is not a question without an answer but rather an answer without its question, i.e., bereft of its proper symbolic context" (*Tarrying* 185). As a result, in the case of *Fight Club*, the male subject hinges his transgressive, masculine identity on the symptom, and in doing so, he is then obliged to look for his symptom's proper context and thereby locate the temporal means to frame his identity as something unique or distinctive.

19. This proper frame is, of course, history, and because of this we can begin to see why *Fight Club* displays such a conspicuous concern with both masochism *and* historical periodization as the twin lineaments of the text's construction of masculinity. As Tyler's signature act of cinematic insertion suggests, identity seeks a time that it can call its own, a time that says *I am now and not then*, a time that can render Heidegger's temporality of Being into a sameness we call identity. As Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture*, time, in the form of continuity and tradition, is frequently invoked as a sameness that subsumes contested space(s) and contested time(s) under the rubrics of national, cultural, and ethnic singularities.⁷ Bhabha's study of the temporality of collective signification identifies a long-standing assumption that identity is constituted, ontologically, by the time(s) to which it lays claim. To belong to an era, a history, or a tradition, in other words, is to

partake of an essential condition that in many ways marks and shapes us as distinctive, *as belonging to this time and not another*. The fact that the ontology of any historical condition and the ways in which it (allegedly) marks us are perpetually contested does not challenge the logic itself, but only serves to underscore how crucial time and history are to most conceptions of identity.

20. What this means is that in *Fight Club*, the very identification with historical period, along with the essence it is thought to confer, becomes integral to the text's construction of masculine identity. Periodization become the "screen" against which the text's projected masculinity can become visible and emerge as itself, even if this "screen" is constitutive of identity rather than reflective. Periodization, in other words, is the promise of the symptom's final context and the possibility of identity's ultimate guarantee. As a result, because of the importance of periodization, it is *Fight Club*'s historical imagination that is charged with envisioning the final, (historical) context that will "complete" the text's notion of identity.
21. An important declaration of *Fight Club*'s historical self-consciousness is given by Tyler Durden (and repeated by his acolytes) in his explanations of the significance of the fight clubs. Tyler's reasons for the necessity of both the fight clubs and then Project Mayhem are explained in conspicuously historical terms: it is not simply that contemporary consumer culture has emasculated men, but rather, the identity crises afflicting the (white) male subject should be read as the result of a postmodern "present" bereft of historical distinctiveness or identity. In other words, Tyler reads the crisis of masculinity and the concomitant need for masochism as imbricated within a larger historical condition. Variants of this "Tyler Durden dogma" (141) are expressed throughout both *Fight Club* texts, and Fincher's film wisely condenses them into a manifesto-like speech given by Tyler Durden at the beginning of the first fight club:

We are the middle children of History, man,
with no purpose or place; we have no great
war, no great depression; our great war is a
spirit war, our great depression's our
lives. (Fincher)

It is here that we can first glimpse *Fight Club*'s anxiety over historical periodization, or more precisely, an anxiety over the *absence* of periodization that could serve as the proper context/support for identity. What Tyler announces is a familiar form of postmodern historical self-consciousness--one in which the "present" is conceived in crepuscular terms as an aftermath without recourse to a form of History predicated on the event. It is the event that anchors traditional History and makes periodization possible by negotiating sameness and difference: it is the event that distinguishes one time from another, and it is the event that marks/creates any particular period, which in turn is governed by the logic of the same. Without the demarcation of the event,

periodization as a form of sameness is impossible, and without periodization, identity as a form of temporal distinctiveness is impossible.⁸

22. According to Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*'s deployment of hypermasculinity and masochism should be read as an expression of anxious preterition or "end of History" anxiety.⁹ The men of *Fight Club* fear their exclusion from a teleological and/or eschatological structure to History, and as the narrator suggests, this structure of History is personified into religious, patriarchal terms:

We are God's middle children according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in History and no special attention. Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope of damnation or redemption. Which is worse, hell or nothing? Only if we're caught and punished can we be saved. (141)

Clearly, "nothing" is worse, because it is the very absence of periodization and its essence that leaves identity equally void. Bereft of "God's attention," an hypostatization of History as a metaphysical presence, the "present" becomes interstitial--*not yet eschatological and thus not yet Historical*. In Derridean terms, this condition is the "disjointure" that (un)marks the present and (un)marks all related ontologies, including periodization. In contrast to the alleged sufficiency of the present to be itself, to be a distinctive *time of the same*, Derrida conceives of temporality as characterized by a Heideggerian "in betweenness" that disrupts the boundaries between present, past, and future. In a reading that takes Hamlet's lament that "time is out of joint" as emblematic of this disjointure, Derrida paraphrases this understanding of time as it is proposed in Heidegger's "Anaximander Fragment":

The present is what passes, the present comes to pass [*se passit*], it lingers in this transitory passage (*Wiele*), in the coming-and-going, between what goes and what comes, in the middle of what leaves and what arrives, at the articulation between what absents itself and what presents itself. (*Specters* 25)

Caught in this disjointure as the "middle children of history," Tyler Durden and his followers await the event and with it, the distinction that periodization supposedly brings. Ironically, Tyler's very conception of this disjointure--of this diegetic "present" that has not (yet) become a period--precludes the very identificatory closure that periodization allegedly promises. History as a form of identity, it seems, is always to come.

23. Instead, what remains as *Fight Club*'s most consistent condition--in addition to its relentless masochism--is the "perpetual present" described by theorists of postmodern consumer culture.¹⁰ The

diegesis of *Fight Club* is precisely this postmodern present, one whose only salient feature is the "simultaneity and instantaneity" (Heise 23) of Western technological, communicative, and consumptive practices. In one notable sequence in Fincher's film, for instance, consumer items instantly "appear" in the narrator's condominium as he mentions them by name, and periodically, throughout his narration, brand names intrude, Delillo-like, into his consciousness. Similarly, the constraints on any kind of Jamesonian cognitive mapping of this temporal "present" or space are conveyed stylistically, rendered in Fincher's film through its somber, caliginous lighting and ubiquitous anonymity. There are no wide-angle, establishing shots that might avail some purchase or perspective, and there are few proper names, locations, or dates. This is, in most respects, a claustrophobically generic city, nation, and time.

24. Curiously, as Tyler's description of the "middle men of history" reveals, this postmodern "condition" is perceived to be an inadequate form of distinctiveness and thus a failed lineament of a new, anticipated periodization. Why might this be so? Why does the masculinity/masochism Tyler and his followers embrace belong to another (future) context and not the present? It would be tempting to locate the essence of this masculine identity as akin to the "present." The narrator, could, in other words, identify with his insomnia as a defining symptom of his own, postmodern time and become one more postmodern subject who laments his Baudrillardian, simulated condition, as the narrator seemingly has the opportunity to do in the beginning of *Fight Club*:

So I didn't cry at my first support group, two years ago. I didn't cry at my second or my third support group, either. I didn't cry at blood parasites or bowel cancers or organic brain dementia. This is how it is with insomnia. Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy. The insomnia distance of everything, you can't touch anything and nothing can touch you.
(20-1)

As we have seen, however, it is because of the logic of the symptom that the narrator looks to a future time in which his identity will become meaningful or "complete."

25. This proleptic move is necessary, not only because the masochistic masculinity averred by *Fight Club* is merely a form of deferral, but also--and more inclusively--because *Fight Club*'s narrative needs to identify *another time* as a possible location of difference and an "outside" to its own narrative presuppositions. It is important to remember that histories of identities suffer from the same tautology that besets histories of periods: the subject is hopelessly conflated with, and implicated in, its (historical) object. In *Fight Club* the diegetic past is the diegetic present: there is no history of something other than Tyler's masochistic condition.

Analogously, as Tony Myers explains, modernity and postmodernity cannot locate or identify themselves as distinct, consistent historical eras with distinct, consistent antecedents, because each "is of a piece with the history it underwrites, forever repeating itself...in the mirror of inscription at the expense of its object" (37). As a result of this conflation between subject and object, history--in the mode of a diachronic unfolding and a proliferating of difference--disappears as it is transformed into a object/period of study and a temporal frame that supports the present. Without difference or otherness there cannot be temporal change; without temporal change, there cannot be temporal distinction; without temporal distinction, there cannot be the historical "framing" of identity as something unique, even revolutionary. As Myers summarizes, "without the 'otherness' of the past we have nothing against which to define the now. We are thus besieged by a 'nowness' for which we can prescribe no limits" (34). In order to misrecognize this circular logic as something other than a hopeless, tautological gesture, *Fight Club* must locate the otherness necessary for its own act of historical framing. It must, in other words, "locate" a history for its identity and tell the story of how a new identity *emerges and comes to be*. Ultimately, the present, postmodern "condition" will not work as the sole support for identity: it is already too much a part of identity's tautological gesture and thus too close to the identity it needs to objectify and foreground.¹¹

26. In the context of this tautology, it is clear that the theater projection that is one of Tyler Durden's signature acts should be read as an allegory for *Fight Club*'s overriding historiographic impulse, representing as it does the desire to "see" oneself historically and to locate--from without, from another time--the contours of one's temporal identity. This desire is, of course, pure fantasy, but it is also the necessary, imaginative response to an impossibility created by historical self-consciousness. In other words, how can any historically situated act of reflection or discourse--a discourse that is itself a temporal event and part of a diachronic process of cultural production--see the boundaries of its own historicity as the "time" in which similarity inheres but also gives way to difference? According to Lee Spinks, this is the antinomic tension between "genesis and structure" that raises the question of "how a term within a totality could act as a representation of that totality" (2). As the image of Tyler's unsuspecting theater audience suggests, the "solution" to this historiographic impossibility is to have one's time and one's identity (for both are conflated in *Fight Club*) recognized by the Other. This is a crucial reformulation of the way historiography is usually conceived. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, recognition plays a key role in the formation and support for identity. In this framework, the identity of the subject is equivalent to the subject's perceived position in the sliding metonymic signification that is the Symbolic order. This process makes subjectivity beholden to the evanescent, shifting logic of the signifier, which, according to Lacan's famous

definition, "represents the subject for another signifier." Within this metonymic logic, the consistency of identity is achieved through an appeal to the "Big Other" as that which (finally) guarantees identity, and this "appeal" often assumes the form of interpellation: a quasi-Hegelian dynamic of intersubjective (mis)recognition and symbolic identification. As Žižek explains, this interpellation means that the subject assumes a role it plays for the Other, and it is this role that confers consistency on the subject:

the subject is always fastened, pinned, to a signifier which represents him for the other, and through this pinning he is loaded with a symbolic mandate, he is given a place in the intersubjective network of symbolic relations. The point is that this mandate is ultimately arbitrary: since its nature is performative, it cannot be accounted for by reference to the "real" properties and capacities of the subject. (*Sublime* 113)

Implicitly, the Other is itself an effect of the logic and structure of the signifying network; it is the necessary presupposition that makes symbolic identification--and hence identity--possible. It enables us, according to Lacan, to "make ourselves seen" to ourselves through the process of recognition vis-À-vis the Other.¹²

27. For Tyler Durden and the men of *Fight Club*, the Other can only be a personified History itself, and the Other's "symbolic mandate," as theorized by Žižek, is the perceived call to revolution. As the "middle children of history" (141) and "a generation of men raised by women" (50), the men of *Fight Club* await the return of a figurative, absent father and the historical recognition "he" will bring. The Father *qua* History is, in essence, the judgment of the future, the final (symbolic) context that will confer meaning on masochism, Project Mayhem, and the masculine identity that pins its hopes on both. For this reason, Tyler and his men don't care if they achieve "damnation or redemption" (141)--all that matters is that they are recognized as having an historical identity as such.
28. This identity and the form of historical recognition it requires are complicated by the fact that both masochism and Project Mayhem are asserted as a revolutionary movement bent on creating a revolutionary time that will support a revolutionary identity for its participants. Within the context of Tyler's conception of eschatological History, how is this revolutionary identity to be framed? Is the new, revolutionary movement related in any way to the emasculating, postmodern context and that context's cultural/historical antecedents, and if not, how can one frame a decisive break as something not dependent--even in its negation--on those antecedents? How, in other words, can the revolutionary identity be both unique *and* historical?
29. In *Fight Club*, this impossibility is registered in terms of an ambivalent, contradictory relationship to the Other *qua* History. On

the one hand, the men see themselves as bereft of patrimony in a post-historical, post-stadialist present, and this patrimony is figured as a form of parental neglect and/or abeyance. On the other hand, and by virtue of the impossible logic of periodization, that *absence* of History must become, dialectically, an oppressive presence against which the defining event of the (future) revolution and masculine identity can be framed. It is this contradictory, dialectical "presence" of History that the Other embodies and figures. As a result, Tyler Durden and his followers often imagine themselves as the victims of the Other *qua* History, victims who must face the accumulating excretions of a History in decline. According to the narrator, "What Tyler says about being the crap and the slaves of History, that's how I felt," (123) and similarly, the narrator observes that

for thousands of years, human beings had screwed up and trashed and crapped on this planet, and now History expected me to clean up after everyone. I have to wash out and flatten my soap cans. And account for every drop of used motor oil. (124)

As these passages suggest, the historical imagination in *Fight Club* oscillates between a rhetoric of orphanhood, neglect, and disjunction and a rhetoric of (oppressive) continuity. In short, there is the perception that there is *not enough History and at the same time too much*.¹³ As a result, the figuration of the symbolic mandate of the Other becomes equally inconsistent. According to the narrator, if Project Mayhem succeeds in destroying the infrastructure of capital, it will effectively "blast the world free of History" (124). Like all revolutions, Project Mayhem is as much an assault on the past, on the antecedent, as it is a transformation of the present into the future:

Somewhere in the one hundred and ninety-one floors under us, the space monkeys in the Mischief Committee of Project Mayhem are running wild, destroying every scrap of History. (12)

At the same time, however, the revolution needs History, or more precisely, it needs to become History and be assimilated within a transcendent, temporal logic that will someday--finally, irrevocably--recognize the revolution's significance for what it must really be. Contemplating the imminent bombing of the financial tower in which he stands, the narrator of *Fight Club* presumes the existence of the Other's judgment, and as a result, he imagines the impending destruction as already imbricated within its future documentation as a Historical event:

The demolition team will hit the primary charge in maybe eight minutes. The primary charge will blow the base charge, the foundation columns will crumble, and the photo series of the Parker-Morris Building

will go into all the History books. The five-picture time lapse series. Here the building's standing. Second picture, the building will be at an eighty-degree angle. Then a seventy-degree angle. The building's at a forty-five-degree-angle in the fourth picture when the skeleton starts to give and the tower gets a slight arch to. The last shot, the tower, all one hundred and ninety-one floors, will slam down on the national museum which is Tyler's real target. (14)

Conspicuously, of course, Tyler's perspective on the defining event of his revolution and the historical "perspective" on that event are literally one and the same. By arrogating the (future) perspective of the Other, Tyler hedges his bets against the judgment of History--imagining that the future, as the Other, will recognize his movement and its attendant masculinity in the same way that Tyler himself sees them.¹⁴

30. As the culmination of Project Mayhem's revolutionary event and, as such, the support for *Fight Club*'s notion of masculinity, the anticipated destruction of the Parker-Morris building brings us back to the logic of the interstitial afterimage. Like the pornographic insertion that will exist only in retrospect, this revolutionary act of terrorism will also only be remembered as a "five-picture time-lapse series" (14) that will exist only for future historians. Both are phallic projections writ large, ones whose physical size compensates for their evanescence and thus for the tenuousness of the masculine identities associated with them. As the earlier description of Tyler's cinematic sabotage makes clear, both are phallic "towers" that are in danger of not being recognized as such:

A single frame in a movie is on the screen for one-sixtieth of a second. Divide a second into sixty equal parts. That's how long the erection is. Towering four stories tall over the popcorn auditorium, slippery red and terrible, and no one sees it. (30)

It is against the "screen" created by the Other *qua* History that Tyler Durden projects and frames his notion of masculinity--an act designed so someone can indeed come to see this figurative, historical erection that is Tyler's revolutionary time. It is the Other that allows Tyler to disavow his performative assertion and thereby imagine the contours of this time from "outside" of his own narrative and historiographic presuppositions. Just as Tyler "sees" himself through the displaced, split mirror of an anonymous narrator, *Fight Club* dramatizes how historical self-consciousness, as a form of (narrative) identity, is necessarily schizophrenic because it is necessarily and inevitably tautological.

Thinking Historically in Postmodernity

31. In the context of postmodern historiography and the debates over how to conceptualize postmodern historicity, perhaps the complex, historical construction of identity in *Fight Club* hints at an alternative dynamic at work in contemporary postmodern fiction--one that offers a rejoinder of sorts to those who, following Fredric Jameson, conceive of postmodernity as "an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (*Postmodernism* ix). According to Jameson in his now well-known argument, postmodern theoretical and aesthetic practices, as well as the omnipresence of a totalizing, spatial logic of global capitalism, have pre-empted all attempts to "think the totality" of our cultural/material condition and to construct a "genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History" (46). Jameson's seemingly contradictory attempts to historicize the "waning of our historicity" (21) should be viewed as part of larger attempt not only to think the totality by critiquing the "present" in historical-material terms but also--and perhaps more importantly--to ground or account for the act of critique itself as it doubles back upon its own temporal matrix. Jameson's career seems bent on constructing the complex hermeneutic and dialectical frameworks that could answer such a question--namely, how can critique be both "of its time" ideologically while still offering the ability to obtain conceptual purchase on the totality that is the "present."¹⁵ However, what if there is no such position and thus no "outside"--temporally, dialectically, and hermeneutically--that could frame "postmodernity" as a consistent object, time, or material condition? What if, in other words, thinking the totality of postmodernity *from within or from without* is perpetually doomed to failure, largely because "Jameson's critique of contemporary cultural production therefore appears destined to become merely the latest effect of a system of conceptuality that he wants to outflank" (Spinks 13)?
32. What *Fight Club* suggests is that this failure isn't as debilitating for historical production as it might seem. In fact, it may be vital to it. With the absence of viable conceptuality to "think the totality" of the present in ontological, historical, or material/cultural terms, we are still left with the exigencies of constructing identities--a process that nonetheless still invokes History and periodization as the necessary, transcendent horizons for framing identity, even if these are largely empty, formal categories without content or closure. For this reason, perhaps Jameson was right to suggest that fictive narrative articulates "our collective thinking and our collective *fantasies* about history and reality" (emphasis added) (*Political Unconscious* 34), but only if an emphasis on fantasy obliges further exploration of how psychoanalysis can frame the historiographic impulse, especially as it underwrites identity.¹⁶ In other words, "thinking historically" is a process that can never locate its object *qua* period/identity, but according to *Fight Club*, what may be more important is the way that this *process of failure becomes itself a more fundamental dynamic of identity formation* in postmodern historicity.

33. What texts like *Fight Club* can contribute is a depiction of the ways a certain kind of figured, historical intersubjectivity informs the historiographic process. Thinking historically is a process whose only consistency seems to be its own perpetual, tautological gesture to frame itself and its own attempts to misrecognize this gesture by imagining an Other and a concomitant symbolic mandate that are, by necessity, "outside" of the temporal frame of what Teresa Brennan has aptly dubbed the "ego's era." In its invocation of the Other *qua* History as the support for identity, *Fight Club* suggests that maybe Jameson is right to insist on "cognitive mapping" as a means of thinking postmodernity's material/cultural condition--but only if this form of interpellation is truly, as Jameson announces, part of a "return to the Lacanian underpinnings of Althusser's theory" (*Postmodernism* 53). From a Lacanian perspective, historical interpellation is less about identifying the historical/material lineaments of the postmodern "present" and more about creating and securing an identity through a perpetual, imagined form of historical recognition vis-À-vis the Other.¹⁷ Although the Other is merely an effect--a necessary presupposition--in the system that produces "identity," the Other supports the process of identity formation by providing a logic and a structure that explains why identity, historically speaking, is always to come. Just as the meaning of Tyler's masculine revolution is always to come, the identity of postmodernity--as a period, condition, or a practice--is similarly deferred and unavailable.
34. Ultimately, the presence of this intersubjective dynamics changes our understanding what it means for a text to be "historical" as a reflection of its time. Texts like *Fight Club* are not immanently "marked" or informed by their postmodern period or time so much as they assert--performatively, imaginatively, tautologically, in a most Tyleresque fashion--what their time (and identity) ought to be.

Postscript: The Divergent Endings of *Fight Club*

35. *Fight Club* is a wildly compensatory text, one that brims with a decidedly American, white-male-centered version of "our collective thinking and fantasies about History and reality" and one whose historical imagination is imbricated within a graphic celebration of a "deeply conservative articulation of masculinity...[which] is associated with the virility of industrialization and the social assertion of masculine power in physical labor and war" (Giroux and Szeman 33). In its megalomaniacal assumption that a single individual can engender a historically definitional social and political movement, *Fight Club* clearly expresses the kind of compensatory paranoia Patrick O'Donnell identifies as a defining temporal logic of American postmodern literature and film. Paranoia, O'Donnell argues, is a narrative strategy for recouping the identity of the postmodern, fragmented, rhizomatic subject by, in effect, conflating it with national and cultural identities within a prefigurative temporal framework. Paranoia is, in other words, the

use of "destinal" History to consolidate identity, a process that requires "a certain suturing of individuals to the social imaginary in which crucial differences between agency and national or other identificatory fantasies are collapsed" (13).

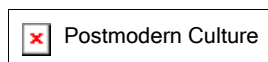
36. In Fincher's cinematic adaptation of Palahniuk's novel, this paranoia is encapsulated in the final scene of the film, although this scene is, as mentioned earlier, a rare but pivotal departure from the novel. After the film's narrator shoots himself, his "Tyler" personality vanishes, and he is reunited with Marla Singer as the two survey the detonations that signal the onset of Project Mayhem. As if to underscore the paranoid conflation of psyche and History at work in the scene, the narrator explains to his long-suffering love-interest, "you've met me at a very strange time in my life" (Fincher). Not only does the scene aver the paranoid suturing of the narrator's biography and the revolutionary event, but in doing so it also ends with a metaphysical guarantee: with the beginning of Project Mayhem, the revolution--and by extension, History itself--will unfold according to the logic and plan of Tyler Durden. By implying the "success" of the vision of History announced by Tyler Durden, Fincher's film demonstrates how the paranoid (narrative) attempt to situate oneself in History results in an paradoxical "elision of temporality" (O'Donnell 25) in which temporal difference is erased in favor of a conception of History in which change can be predicted and future iterations are immanent--and thus "knowable"--by virtue of their origins.¹⁸ In other words, Fincher allows Tyler's vision of History to be the final word on the matter, and this paranoid confirmation of the shape and logic of the future is tantamount to knowing what the judgment of History will be. As a (confirmed) part of History, Project Mayhem will, in the future, be grasped and understood as part of a continuity whose cynosure is the bombing of the Parker-Morris building.
37. On the other hand, Fincher's paranoid conclusion is, ultimately, a distortion, if not an outright repudiation, of the Lacanian logic of the novel. If, as I have been arguing, *Fight Club* provides an example of a psychoanalytic dynamic at work in the way postmodern texts "think historically" and recognize themselves as historical, then the apparent efficacy of Fincher's ending--its narrative that conflates the subject with a reconstituted, metaphysical Historical logic--would seem to deny the crucial Lacanian insight that the construction of both personal and historical identity is an interminable process in a perpetual state of deferral or impossibility.
38. In contrast to Fincher's conclusion, Palahniuk's novel emphasizes this inevitability of deferral. Because Tyler Durden awakes in a mental institution after his self-inflicted gunshot wound, the onset of Project Mayhem's revolutionary event is presumably pre-empted, and the reliability of the narrator and hence the ontology of the "revolution" are both thrown into question. Although the existence of bruised and battered orderlies in the

asylum, along with their remarks to Tyler, suggest an independent confirmation of the existence of the fight club movement, Tyler's closing remarks from the hospital emphasize the choice of *deferral* over the engagement of the movement itself:

But I don't want to go back. Not yet. Just because. Because every once in a while, somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches, and he says:
 "We miss you Mr. Durden."
 Or somebody with a broken nose pushes a mop past me and whispers:
 "Everything's going according to the plan."
 Whispers:
 "We're going to break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world."
 Whispers:
 "We look forward to getting you back." (207-8)

Critically, Tyler chooses to delay his return to the outside world because it is here, inside the institution, that anticipation--and thus the same logic of deferral that governs masochism--can be endlessly prolonged. Tyler Durden will never "break up civilization," and Tyler's postmodern "present" will never achieve its distinctive, revolutionary significance and identity; instead, this impossibility itself is deferred and thereby transformed into possibility. In Zizekian terms, this is a dialectical reversal whereby deferral itself becomes the object of desire and the positive support for identity: "the impeded desire converts into a desire for impediment; the unsatisfied desire converts into a desire for dissatisfaction; a desire to keep our desire 'open': the fact that we 'don't really know what we really want'--what to desire--converts into a desire not to know, a desire for ignorance" (*For They Know Not* 143-144). Given what we know about the difficulties of figuring and accounting for one's historical identity, this ending seems preferable to Fincher's--if only because it reminds us of how thinking and positioning oneself historically is always an act of fantasy that can never end and never succeed. It must wait, in other words, for just the right time.

English Department
Michigan State University
kfriday@msu.edu



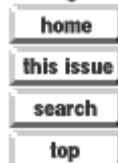
Copyright © 2003

Krister Friday

NOTE:

Readers may use portions of this work in accordance with the Fair Use provisions of U.S. copyright law. In addition, subscribers and members of subscribed institutions may use the entire work for any internal noncommercial purpose but, other than one copy sent by

email, print, or fax to one person at another location for that individual's personal use, distribution of this article outside of a subscribed institution without express written permission from either the



author or the [Johns Hopkins University Press](#) is expressly forbidden.

Notes

1. In what looks to be the only academic review of Fincher's film, Henry A. Giroux and Imre Szeman excoriate Fincher's film and by implication, Palahiuk's novel, arguing that far from a viable, Marxist critique of consumer culture, *Fight Club* essentially offers merely a "regressive, vicious politics" that "reconfirm[s] capitalism's worst excesses and re-legitimate[s] its ruling narratives" (33).

2. For example, in *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau argues that historical "knowledge" is more about contemporary interests and identity and less about preserving the Otherness of the past. In this view, history is the means by which one generation expresses its difference from its predecessors and that, as a figurative "dialogue with the dead," history "engages a group's communication with itself through this reference to an absent third party" (46).

3. Most historical logics "solve" this problem through the concept of latency, in which identity can be both "present" and "absent" in the tradition or the historical record. For a discussion of the way in which latency serves as the iterative, contentious ground for national and ethnic identities, see Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, especially Chapter 8. See also Slavoj Žižek's *Tarrying with the Negative*, specifically his account of how "a nation finds its sense of self-identity by discovering itself as already present in its tradition" (148). For a discussion of how postmodern subjectivity appropriates latency for similar ends, see Patrick O'Donnell's *Latent Destinies*.

4. In his discussion of Lacan's changing notion of the symptom in relation to the sinthome, Žižek concludes the following:

What we must bear in mind here is the radical ontological status of symptom: symptom, conceived as sinthome, is literally our only substance, the only positive support for our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject. (*Sublime* 75)

5. In its approach to violence, even if it is largely masochistic violence, *Fight Club* betrays the same performative logic shared by most mainstream action movies: it positions violence (or masochism) as a vehicle in the service of something else (e.g., a lofty socio/political goal, a resolution facilitating a new identity position, etc.), but its construction of masculine identity depends not upon the goal, but upon the

vehicle itself. If it is the vehicle that supports identity, then the vehicle must be prolonged. As Sally Robinson's work makes clear, the narratives of white male decline operate according to this performative logic: it is not the wounding that leads to its own reversal and a new identity--it is the wounding itself and its perpetuation that confers identity. This is why, according to Robinson, narratives of white male decline have an interest in perpetuating the very conditions they seem to bemoan:

In fact, and in consonance with the logic we've already seen many times in this study, that deterioration is necessary to the cultural recuperation of white masculinity--not because wounds are the necessary condition for recuperations, but because those wounds and the impossibility of their full healing are the basis of a new, post-liberationist white masculinity. (89)

6. In other words, according to Lacan, meaning is signification that has not (yet) changed: it is signification that has not (yet) given way to subsequent signs and subsequent contexts. However, the consistency of meaning is inherently menaced by the sliding, metonymic signification that is the Symbolic order and the inherent logic of language. Like words in a sentence whose meanings are only "finished" when the sentence ends (but again always subject to additional sentences and additional paragraphs, and so on), meaning is always and only the process of postponement and revision.

7. In his seminal work, *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha articulates how historical narratives of continuity, narratives that retroactively create culture, nation and "the authenticating 'inward' time of Tradition," (149) are internally menaced by the logic of iteration and the constant need to performatively transform signs of the present into signs of "Tradition." For Bhabha, this split between the "pedagogical" and the "performative" means that the postcolonial time of the present and all its attendant identities is always split, always ambivalent, always never present, except in retrospect. As a result, what is modern becomes nothing so much as a contested space of iteration:

The problematic boundaries of modernity are enacted in these ambivalent temporalities of the nation-space. The language of culture and community is poised on the fissures of the present becoming the rhetorical figures of a national past. Historians transfixed on the event and origins of the nation never ask...the essential question of

the representation of the nation as a temporal process. (142)

8. In his reading of Foucault's genealogy of Western mental illness, Derrida explains how any history that invokes the event as a transitional concept at the same time invokes History as a metaphysical presence and continuity:

The attempt to write the history of the decision, division, difference runs the risk of construing the division as an event or a structure subsequent to the unity of an original presence, thereby confirming metaphysics in its fundamental operation. (*Cogito* 40)

9. In many ways, Derrida's *Specters of Marx* is a meditation on what remains, historically speaking, without the event. In a question that has implications for Tyler's "end of history" speech, Derrida asks,

How can one be late to the end of history? A question for today. It is serious because it obliges one to reflect again, as we have been doing since Hegel, on what happens and what deserves the name of event, after history; it obliges one to wonder if the end of history is but the end of a certain concept of history. (15)

10. According to Jameson, the postmodern "present," in its erasure of historical difference, is characterized by an intensity that is both overwhelming and euphoric. Jameson writes,

The breakdown of temporality suddenly releases this present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis; thereby isolated, that present suddenly engulfs the subject with undescribable [sic] vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material-- or better still, the literal--signifier in isolation. (*Postmodernism* 28)

Summarizing contemporary theories of postmodern historicity, Ursula Heise explains how the "perpetual present" of postmodernity impoverishes our historical self-consciousness and, in historiographic terms, precludes the historiographic contextualization of the present as period or object. According to Heise, these theories all emphasize the contemporary focus on a present that is increasingly conceived as taking over both past and future, and the

difficulty of envisioning temporal patterns that transcend the present and allow the observer to view it from a distance. (30)

11. The collapse between the present and the self, and the way this collapse inhibits historical understanding, is explained Teresa Brennan's *History After Lacan*. Brennan argues that capitalism, especially its commodification of nature, reinforces the ego's psychotic, "foundational fantasy" in which the ego attempts to assimilate all objects as extensions of the self. Brennan observes that "an objectifying projection is a condition of subjectivity" and that rampant commodification only exacerbates the desire to control as a means of maintaining and expanding the domain of the ego (23).

The fact that the narrator of *Fight Club* feels emasculated by his own instantaneous consumption and the fact that he yearns for a revolutionary historicity outside of that consumption suggests that his present is in the grips of the "ego's era" in which the ego reduces what there is to itself, it reduces it 'to the same place': to one's own standpoint, and, in this sense, eliminates the distance between one's experience and that of the other. By locating these experiences in the same place, by making them spatially identical, the ego's expansion thus eliminates the reality of distance. In turn, this means that the historical reference point that enables one to say that something is outside or beyond the self's present experience is also the reference point which would enable a line to be drawn between the here and the now in perception, and images and memories that appear to be immediate but are not. It is this reference point that the ego's era erases. (39)

12. Zizek makes an important distinction between imaginary and symbolic identification, the latter being the notion of identification I am ascribing to the dynamics of postmodern historical self-consciousness. In imaginary identification, the subject appropriates a flattering image or identity for itself, although Zizek argues that most instances of imaginary identification have a built-in symbolic dimension as well. According to Zizek, this symbolic dimension means that

imaginary identification is always identification on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other. So, apropos of every imitation of a model-image, apropos of every 'playing a role,' the question to ask is: for *whom* is the subject

enacting this role? Which *gaze* is considered when the subject identifies himself with a certain image? (*Sublime* 106)

It is symbolic identification, then, that creates the possibility of intersubjectivity and thus, the possibility for a historically-mediated relation to the Other.

13. Interestingly, this ambivalent experience of history as both too much and too little correlates with Peter Middleton and Tim Woods's observation that in postwar American culture and fiction there is "a widespread sense that the past has changed, but considerable disagreement as to whether it has mutated, become foreign, dangerous, been murdered or lost all its power..." (50).

14. Lacanian psychoanalysis argues that identity can only be described and taken as a "complete" object in the past tense or in the future perfect tense. As Lacan explains, the emergence of identity is "a retroversion effect by which the subject becomes at each stage what he was before and announces himself--he will have been--only in the future perfect tense" (306). It is from this perspective, the perspective of the future anterior, that Tyler attempts to "see" himself historically.

15. As Steven Helmling explains, for Jameson

to "historicize" means on the one hand to achieve a narrative awareness of History and of your critique's own place in it (thus, in good Hegelian fashion, to *achieve* a self-consciousness indispensable to any hoped-for *Aufhebung*), on the other to figure and attest History as an "untranscendable" Necessity that critique must *suffer* as its very condition (thus, in good Marxist fashion, to own that consciousness cannot determine, but is inescapably determined by, material conditions). (91)

16. As a reflection of what Peter Middleton and Tim Woods describe as "signs of changing cultural experiences of the past" (141) in postmodern culture, there are a handful of recent studies that explicitly or implicitly explain the act of "thinking historically" or constructing history in postmodern fiction in terms of psychological/psychoanalytic dynamics.

For instance, in *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960's Fiction*, Amy Elias argues that postmodern historical fiction is a form of "metahistorical romance" that combines a post-

empirical, post-narrative skepticism toward historical ontology with a fabulist impulse to rewrite, reshape, and rework a "sublime" history that resists totalizing representations. Elias compares the workings of the metahistorical romance to a "traumatized consciousness" and argues that "history is something we know we can't learn, something we can only desire" (xviii).

Similarly, in *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative*, Patrick O'Donnell explains how paranoia is the narrative strategy through which (historical) identity is asserted and affirmed in the face of postmodern cultural and theoretical decenterings and dispersions. According to O'Donnell, paranoia is the dominant form of historical self-consciousness in American culture today, in part because paranoia offers "fantasies of control and identification" (8) in a postmodern, late-capitalist global network that threatens the integrity and agency of the subject. As a mode of figuring history, paranoia offers

the last epistemology, the final form of human knowledge before knowledge passes away into information. Paranoia is, at root, a way of knowing ourselves in relation to others as having the capacity to be known, to be seen, to be objects of desire and attention. (9)

17. In *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau advances a similar, psychoanalytic account of historiography that has greatly influenced my own, arguing that the Other is integral to the historiographic endeavor itself and, by extension, to the identities of those who write history:

A structure belonging to modern Western culture can doubtless be seen in this historiography: *intelligibility is established through a relation with the other*; it moves (or "progresses") by changing what it makes of its "other"--the Indian, the past, the people, the mad, the child, the Third World. (3)

For Certeau, the Other is an impossible object of knowledge: as the very limit of or resistance to understanding, it is the unending support for a perpetual hermeneutic endeavor, even though that endeavor is predicated on assimilating--and thus destroying--the otherness it presupposes and the otherness on which it ultimately depends. This is why, in the passage given above, Certeau suggests that the discourse of history must perpetually "change what it makes of its other" and find new otherness in order to support its own activity. By implication, history and the historiographic act need to be prolonged and renewed because they are, primarily, discourses of power and identity. History is, in other words, a means of establishing

the identity of the present by invoking the other.

18. Implicit in O'Donnell's work is an important distinction between temporality and (paranoid) history, a distinction that I have assumed in this paper. According to O'Donnell, paranoia is a retroactive, narrative resignification, but one that must misrecognize its own performative intervention and its own elision of temporality in favor of a seemingly self-evident, "destinal logic" of History. O'Donnell writes,

the consequences of such constructed destinies are inevitably forged in the aftermath of the event itself, but as if the event, in its latency, always possessed this meaning and was always being prepared for by history itself. In this sense, history under paranoia is latent destiny, or history spatialized and stripped of its temporality. (20)

Works Cited

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Brennan, Teresa. *History After Lacan*. London: Routledge, 1984.

Certeau, Michel de. *The Writing of History*. Trans. Tom Conley. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.

Derrida, Jacques. "Cogito and the History of Madness." *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978: 31-63.

---. *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Sacher-Masoch: An Interpretation*. Trans. Jean McNeil. London: Faber, 1971.

Elias, Amy J. *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960's Fiction*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2001.

Fincher, David. dir. *Fight Club*. 1997.

Giroux, Henry A., and Imre Szeman. "IKEA Body and the Politics of Male Bonding: *Fight Club*, Consumerism, and Violence." *New Art Examiner* 28 (2000/2001): 32-37, 60-61.

Heise, Ursula K. *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and*

Postmodernism. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Helmling, Steven. *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson: Writing, the Sublime, and the Dialectic of Critique*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2001.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.

---. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981.

Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: A Selection*. 1966. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1977.

Middleton, Peter, and Tim Woods. *Literatures of Memory: History, Time, and Space in Postwar Writing*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000.

Myers, Tony. "Modernity, Postmodernity, and the Future Perfect." *New Literary History* 32.1 (2001): 33-45.

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. 1996. New York: Holt, 1997.

O'Donnell, Patrick. *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative*. Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 2000.

Robinson, Sally. *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000.

Spinks, Lee. "Genesis and Structure and the Object of Postmodernism." *Postmodern Culture* 11.3. 2001.

Zizek, Slavoj. *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*. New York: Verso, 1991.

---. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997.

---. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. New York: Verso, 1989.

---. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.

Talk Back