

Fight Club (1999) a film by David Fincher

based on Chuck Palahniuk's novel.

Marla as the key element for the narrator's mental disorder



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First rule of fight club is you do not talk about fight club.

Second rule of fight club is you do not talk about fight club...

Well, let's break them both.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Fight Club (1999) is an American film directed by David Fincher, a man that throughout his quite successful career has explored themes such as martyrdom, alienation and dehumanization of modern culture. The film, based on the 1996 novel of the same name by Chuck Palahniuk, carries a decade of technological, stylistic and thematic innovations in the American cinema.

The 90s opened the digital era. What run through the camera in the 90s changed -digital tape rather than celluloid-. For this reason, what run in front of the camera changed too. The prestigious critic, historian and filmmaker Mark Cousins stated in his documentary *Story of Film: An Odyssey* (2011): “It was as if the cinema had started again”. Expressed by Alejandro G. Calvo in a recent retro criticism, we also need to have in account the influence in cinema of the MTV's channel at the end of the 80s because it changed the viewer's consumption of images. This altered the cinematic language of some directors: faster and more mounted images. And coming in this way, it is important to remember that David Fincher started as a music video director (Chanel SensaCine, 2019, 21m).



A) *Frames from the videoclip of Freedom! 90 (1990) directed by David Fincher*

B) *Frames from Fight Club (1999) directed by David Fincher.*

With digital also came Postmodernity in cinema: the idea that there are not great truths, that everything is recycled. Filmmakers started to play games with old genres, quoting from previous films (hyperlinks to film history). Making films about films (Mark Cousins, 2011).

The author of the novel himself, Chuck Palahniuk, in which the film is based, recounted in the sequel of the film, done in the form of a graphic novel, *Fight Club 2* (2015) the following: “(..) everything you own will end up possessing you. So, he had no choice but to let himself be possessed, to write himself inside, to let himself be painted and drawn, to let himself be followed. But again, how do you follow yourself? Extreme postmodernism. Extreme metapostmodernism”.

The coming of digital and postmodernity in cinema made America in the 90s a moment of effervescence. But the movies of the time were innovative in another way: through satire and irony.

The space between science fiction and politics. In this scenario, many movie makers were in conflict with the idea of “Better and bigger than life”, between the dream and reality.

This is why Postmodernism is often focused on the destruction of hierarchies and boundaries. Different times and periods or styles of art are mixed as a common practice of showing fragmentation, contradiction and instability. For this, creators often opened typical portrayals of gender, race, class, genre, and time with the goal of creating something that does not abide by traditional narrative expression.

And because of the latter, postmodernist cinema has most famously been associated with a certain kind of cultish male-orientated cinema of the late 80s and 90s exemplified, in different ways, by the work of directors such as David Lynch, Michael Mann, Quentin Tarantino, Martin Scorsese and also, David Fincher (Roberta Garret, 2007, p. 16). In this scenario, it could be associated with the movie psychology the works at the beginning of the 90s with the stratification of the New Hollywood by Jonathan Demme in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and Martin Scorsese in *Cape Fear* (1991). Both enhancing the aesthetic and commercial value of the form, and the American psyche and underscoring the cinema's vital contact with its public (Julian Stringer, 2013, p.41).



Some Postmodern stylish features encompass: the much they talk about everyday staff and trivial things, a feature that brought new life to the American screenplay writings; the interest in the liminal space (the idea is that the meaning is often generated most productively through the spaces and transitions); or the meta-reference concept, highlighting the construction and relation of the image to other images in media (Mark Cousins, 2011).

Fight Club (1999): meaning through spaces and metareference.

In the 90s, within the domination of Hollywood, a democratization phenom of the means to make movies was developed in Europe. *Dogme 95* was a filmmaking movement that tried to return to traditional cinema and break with all the hegemony established by Hollywood -similar to what happened with Truffaut or Godard in the Nouvelle Vague (José Antonio Luna, 2015).

From a wider sight, the 90s were the beginning of the widespread proliferation of new media such as the Internet. The American society was experiencing an economy booming. It was a time of great prosperity in the United States due to the continued mass mobilization of capital markets through neoliberalism. This will be highly criticized in the films of the decade, and it will also give another vision to film industry. The scriptwriter Ed Neumeier stated in an interview for the British documentary *Story of Film: An Odyssey* (2011): “We are in an era of marketing where the corporates of a sort of blockbuster era try to go to the widest possible audience. They want that everybody like the picture all over the world, independently of its culture.”

It was the decade of the Pop culture; the grunge and hip-hop look; the growing sense among many Americans that no one was safe from unpredictable gun violence; the New Spiritualism , avoiding

specific religious beliefs and teaching instead the ideas of individuality, oneness with nature and simple lifestyles; and the Generation X, the youth depicted at first as cynical, drifting, hopeless and lazy.

It is important as well to highlight the American women's sphere in the 90s. The heating of the third-wave of feminism brought with it a contradictory experience at the time. On the one hand, it was all about girl power, superhuman women, and sex positivity and pornification -postponing marriage and kids liberated women sexually. But by the end of the decade, the more women assumed power, the more power was taken from them through a noxious popular culture that celebrated outright hostility toward women and commercialized their sexuality and insecurity. Stories of notable women in the 90s almost invariably suggest they were sluts, whores, trash, prudes, "erotomaniacs," sycophants, idiots, frauds, emasculators, nutcrackers and succubae (Afua Hirsch, 2018).

Moreover, while a popular postmodernist cinematic practice initially emerged and was critically identified in genres associated with the male audience, the 90s decade witnessed the development of a specifically feminized postmodernist practice in popular women's genres. A British sociologist, Sylvia Walby argues that "postmodernism in social theory has led to the fragmentation of the concepts of sex, race and class and to the denial of the pertinence of overarching theories of patriarchy, racism and capitalism" (Parpart and Marchand, 2003, 5). Thus, feminists of the time often questioned the belief that rational thought and technological innovation could guarantee progress and enlightenment to humanity.

2. FILM CONTEXT OF PRODUCTION

Fight Club became one of the most controversial and discussed of the 90s decade. Like other films that year (*Magnolia*, *Being John Malkovich*...) it was recognized for being innovative both in style and cinematographic form due to the fact that it explored some of newest cinematographic developments at the time.

Fincher intended that the violence in the film worked as a metaphor of the conflict between younger generations and the values system of advertising. He said that *Fight Club* was a movie that belonged to the "coming-of-age" genre, same as *The Graduate* (1967) but with a target audience of thirty-year-old's. The director describes the narrator as a common man, the archetype of *The Graduate*; a guy that does not have a world of possibilities in front of him, he is not able to imagine a way to change his life for the better. He is confused and furious and in response he creates Tyler Durden.

The executive directors of the studio (20th Century Fox) were afraid that the film was "too sinister and seditious", Fincher tried to make it "fun and seditious" by including humor in order to moderate the more sinister elements.

Jim Uhls - one of the screenwriters of the film - described *Fight Club* as a "romantic comedy". He supported this statement by saying "it has to do with the attitudes the characters have towards a healthy relationship [...]"

Fight Club examines the anguish of the X Generation as "sons of the middle of History". Norton said that the film examines the value conflicts of X Generation as the first generation raised in TV culture

- which has its own values system - dictated mostly by advertisement culture; “*the strive for spiritual happiness ending a sense of void*”.

3. PRODUCTION INFORMATION

The novel *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk was published in 1996, but already before its publication a Fox Searchlight Pictures book scout sent a galley proof of the novel to creative executive Kevin McCormick. The executive assigned a studio reader to review the proof as a candidate for a film adaptation, but the reader discouraged it. After it was rejected three more times, producers Josh Donen and Ross Bell saw a potential and expressed interest.

They arranged unpaid screen readings with actors to determine the script's length, they cut out some sections to reduce the running time and they used the shorter script to record its dialogue. Bell sent the recording to Laura Ziskin, head of the division Fox 2000, who listened to the tape and purchased the rights to *Fight Club* from Palahniuk for \$10,000. Donen and Bell chose the screenwriter Jim Uhls and Bell contacted four directors to direct the film. David Fincher, who had already read *Fight Club* and tried to buy the rights himself, talked with Ziskin about directing the film himself.

Even if he initially hesitated to accept the assignment with 20th Century Fox because of a previous unpleasant experience directing the 1992 film *Alien 3* for the studio, in August 1997 20th Century Fox announced that Fincher would be the director of the film adaptation of *Fight Club*.

Concerning the choice of the actors, Ross Bell first met with Russell Crowe to discuss his candidacy for the role of Tyler Durden. Producer Art Linson, who joined the project late, met with Pitt regarding the same role. The studio sought to cast Pitt instead of Crowe, as he was looking for a new film after the domestic failure of his 1998 film *Meet Joe Black* and the producers believed *Fight Club* would be more commercially successful with a major star. Furthermore, Pitt was seen by Fincher as the new James Dean of *Rebels Without a Cause* after his performance in *Thelma and Louise*. Finally, the studio signed the actor for US\$17.5 million.

For the role of the unnamed Narrator instead the studio desired a "sexier marquee name" such as Matt Damon to increase the film's commercial prospects. However, Fincher considered Norton and finally 20th Century Fox agreed and offered him \$2.5 million. In January 1998, the studio announced that Pitt and Norton had been cast.

Fincher's first choice for the unique female role of Marla Singer was Janeane Garofalo, who objected to the film's sexual content. However, in an interview in 2020, Garofalo revealed she did accept the part but was dropped because Norton felt like she was wrong for the part. The filmmakers considered Courtney Love and Winona Ryder as early candidates. The studio wanted to cast Reese Witherspoon, but Fincher felt she was too young. The last but winning choice suggested by Pitt was Helena Bonham Carter, based on her performance in the 1997 film *The Wings of the Dove*, for which she was up for an Oscar. She was being offered a lot of parts, but finally went for *Fight Club*, a movie that totally changed the public's perception of her. She extremely broke with her previous roles in classical and traditional movies to embrace the style which defined her following performances, like in Tim Burton's movies, with a more macabre aesthetic.

Palahniuk praised the faithful film adaptation of his novel and applauded how the film's plot was more streamlined than the book's. The book also contained homoerotic overtones, which Fincher included in the film to make audiences uncomfortable and accentuate the surprise of the twists.

The bathroom scene where Tyler Durden bathes next to the Narrator is just an example. On the other side, the line "I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need" was meant to suggest personal responsibility rather than homosexuality and to give a hint of the following plot twist where precisely a woman, Marla, turns to be the focus of the movie and especially of the main character. The only element that differs from the novel is the ending. If in the book The Narrator is placed in a mental institution, at the end of the movie he finds his redemption, as Fincher considered the novel too infatuated with Tyler Durden.

The fight scenes were heavily choreographed, but the actors prepared very hard for their roles by taking lessons in boxing, taekwondo and grappling to capture realistic effects. Makeup artist Julie Pearce studied mixed martial arts and pay-per-view boxing to portray the fighters accurately.

While some locations were in and around Los Angeles, the majority of them was built in Century City and the production designer Alex McDowell constructed more than 70 sets.

The budget of the whole production has been a controversial matter. Studio executives Mechanic and Ziskin planned an initial budget of US\$23 million to finance the film, but by the start of production it was increased to \$50 million. During filming, the projected budget unexpectedly escalated once more to US\$67 million. Even if he initially petitioned Fincher to reduce the total expenditure, after seeing three weeks of filming the executive producer Arnon Milchan accepted a final production budget of \$63 million. Filming lasted a total of 138 days during which Fincher shot more than 1,500 rolls of film, three times the average of a Hollywood movie.



The director David Fincher with Brad Pitt and Edward Norton on the set of *Fight Club* (1999).

4. HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION

“Marla as the key element for the narrator’s mental disorder.”

The figure of Marla becomes the engine of a personality breakdown whose desired perfect construction of a man is evolved in a toxic masculinity. She is the figure that represents the need of change but in a balanced environment. Marla is in the middle of both characters (personalities); the life-creating element. The seam where the two edges meet.

When Marla meets the narrator in the beginning of the film, after a therapy talk, they found out what they have in common, the object they want to escape from: the blind-deaf consumer society that keeps them alienated and disenchanting. To live along the borders, as outsiders in a society that keeps them away from their true happiness and realization.

He is a man and she is a woman. He will canalize the change in a toxic way, influenced by the sexism throughout history and the idea of the perfect nature of man. He will look for support in the idealized conception of masculinity that he has been instilled since he was conscious. This idea of masculinity as a synonym for power, for strength, as the only way to be self-sufficient, to reach independence and, consequently, the so longed for freedom.

Marla is the common point for the narrator's two faces, for his two parts. Is knowing Marla (and falling in love with her) what triggers his disorder, what creates his alter-ego; Marla creates Tyler.

And Marla will be also the one that will make it possible to destroy him. It is thanks to her that the narrator realizes what is happening and becomes conscious of what he is doing. Marla is the beginning and the end; even if she might seem a secondary character, she could be considered as important as the narrator himself.

5. HYPOTHESIS IN RELATION TO BOTH ITS HISTORICAL AND FILM CONTEXT OF PRODUCTION

The trailblazing women of the 90s in USA were excoriated by a deeply sexist society (Allison Yarrow, 2018). The film itself it is constructed under a raw/toxic masculinity in response of the consumerist society in the 90s and how rapacious capitalism impacts white men. In this scenario, almost all the characters in *Fight Club* are men. The only women’s figure which is given time and a space of importance is the character of Marla Singer. We can almost count her sequences because of its impact force in the movie. She is the one that stops his humdrum life and his personal confidence on its solutions to deal with his life. From her apparition -at a testicular cancer victims support group, the spectator knows that she is going to lead and disturb his path.

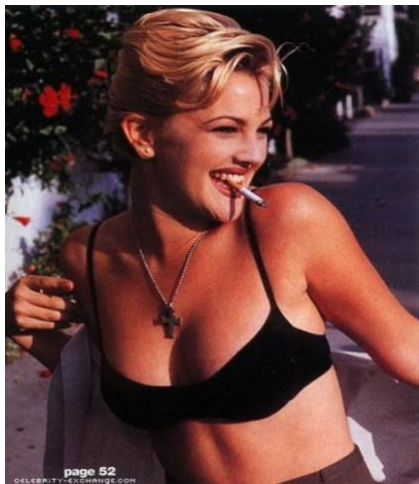
The figure of Marla has that power because of the solitary, attractive and darkness aura that transmits. She is its own world, like the women of the 90s: a superhuman women. She survives by herself, even if that involves primarily stealing food from delivery vans and clothing from laundromats. The narrator fights against the acceptance of him wanting her. She provokes the apparition of his other chaotic and dissociative personality through a toxic masculinity, because it is what dominates the world. She is now seen through Tyler Durden as a sycophant bitch, very close to thrush. This is the

way they are exposed within narratives. He uses her for sex. Here we see reflected how women at the end of the decade started to being sexualized in its own freedom as figures detached from motherhood and marriage. She becomes in that moment her own sexual objectification for Tyler. Marla has been reduced to gruesome sexual fantasies and misogynistic stereotypes.

We observe then, that “Marla as the key element for the narrator’s mental disorder” is also a critic for the women sphere of the decade. Even if they try to gain power, independence and force through multiple path which will then be dissociated; women are key elements in the society and they are motors in men’s behavior. Implicitly, that is what history teaches us over the years. Love yields, and having no leading role does not prevent women from doing even more "harm" or having a great influence in other ways.

On the other hand, this idea of Marla being the engine of the personality breakdown could have been influenced by the Postmodern feminism. Scholars on the field have argued on the denial of the pertinence of overarching theories of patriarchy, racism and capitalism. In other words, they have fought to destabilize the patriarchal norms entrenched in society that have led to gender inequality.

A



B



A) 90s Icon Drew Barrymore for Cosmopolitan.
B) Helena Bonham Carter in Fight Club (1999).

6. ANALYSIS OF THE CHOSEN SEQUENCES

At the time of selecting the different sequences of the film that we considered that could contribute to a greater extent to the demonstration of our hypothesis, we have opted for the following.

Although our hypothesis maintains that the role of Marla is crucial, both when creating the character of Tyler, and when making the narrator aware of his existence, rebel against him and try by all means to destroy him; most of the scenes we have chosen correspond to this second part.

The explanation resides simply in that the sequences that could contribute to the demonstration of the first part are much more dispersed throughout the time that the feature film lasts than those of the second part, among which we can find strong arguments grouped into quite short sequences.

Once the criteria for our selection have been clarified, we proceed to the description and explanation of each of the chosen fragments.

Note: *All the time references are taken from Prime Video streaming version.*

A. (0:40:07 - 0:40:28) Tyler's speech about women.

We chose this scene because it is the only part of the film in which we get to know directly Tyler's opinion about woman, and because he also refers to the historical context that might have influenced this opinion.



"We are a generation of men raised by women". Here we see the implicit power of women through history, which is also implicit in Marla's role throughout the film. With his appearances without taking a dominant role, she is being the root of an entire argument that will be redundant, awarded and criticized throughout the history of cinema.

He is situated in a bathtub, with water around him and in a position which we could associate with giving birth. But he is with his eyes covered; he cannot control the fact that women are part of the circles of buses, that men depend on them. He does not want to be absorbed by their power and implicit influence. Extremism, toxic masculinity over all. *"I am wondering if another woman is really the answer we need"*. Marla Singer is inside the narrator's mind, she is the antagonist, in a way, of Tyler Duren. In this sense, he needs to fight against that.

At the beginning of the scene we find a medium close-up of The narrator in which we can localize Tyler at the back inside the bathtub. The lights are on Tyler, while the narrator is in the shadows. The director wants the spectator to focus on Tyler's speech and his corporal position. The color scheme is warm (yellow) but rather muted, and it evokes strong feelings of both characters.

B. (1:25:46 - 1:27:15) Marla and the Narrator are in the kitchen, talking, while Tyler is downstairs making some annoying noise.

We chose this scene because it is interesting to analyze our idea about how the position of the three characters in the different shots might be a way to establish some hierarchy between them, to show their real importance and power.



This scene begins with Marla and the Narrator talking in the kitchen about support groups and about their respective relations with Tyler; about what do they get out of it. At some point a very loud noise starts annoying the Narrator and he asks Marla “what is that noise?” to which she (obviously) responds “what noise?” and immediately tells him not to change the subject, as if he was trying to get out of the conversation.

Then, the Narrator stands up and opens the door to find Tyler downstairs staring at him and reminding him not to mention his existence, as they had agreed before. In the end, the Narrator repeats what Tyler is telling him to say to Marla, showing that not only are they the same person but Marla is what triggers Tyler’s appearances (when the conversation starts to get serious, the narrator starts hearing the loud noises). This scene is a clear example of how Marla represents a threat to Tyler’s plans and explains why she would be in danger; as we can see in sequence C.

Regarding the film language it is also interesting to notice how in the talk sequence Marla stands in front of the Narrator while he is sitting, and how Tyler appears downstairs, clearly below them both. These positions might be showing us the real hierarchy between the characters, how even if Tyler seems to be the strongest one, he is far below Marla since he is not real and Marla has become a priority for the Narrator.

C. (1:58:26 - 2:00:21) Marla takes the bus out of the city

Near the end of the movie, this scene is deeply representative because it's when The Narrator, or Tyler, finally realizes and admits his need for intimacy and comfort. While sitting at the table of a restaurant where they are clearly surrounded by Fight Club's members, The Narrator confesses his love to Marla and warns her about the dangers she could be facing if she keeps on staying in the city and particularly close to him.



Marla has a dual function along the movie: she represents in the meantime the opposition to the much sought-after masculinity, simply being a woman, but especially the person whose personality and lifestyle mirror the kind of chaotic freedom that The Narrator does not have in his life and shows the viewer that is what he urgently wants. Therefore, admitting his love to Marla he demonstrates his consciousness-raising and finally recognizes that she embodies what he really wants in life, embracing her being chaotic, confrontational and against conformity but also the idea of needing a woman by his side. This also explains why at the end of the scene he insists on telling her to go away for a few days in order not to get hurt again because of him.

The succession of medium shots and medium close-ups permits the viewers to focus on the two characters, enlightened by a grim daylight and finally both filmed in an equal position.

D. (2:15:31-2:16:31) Final sequence: Marla and the Narrator hold hands regarding the explosions once everything has finished.



The final scene lasts barely a few seconds and just illustrates us how Marla is the one that stays with the Narrator when everything is over. As we will explain in the intertextuality part, she ends up marrying him and they will start a family.

It is a shot from their backs with very low illumination, which highlights the fire and the explosions as the main light. They symbolize the future, a new world; Tyler wanted it to be a world without the oppression and alienation of consumerism, but metaphorically and paradoxically, it also represents a world without Tyler.

7. RECEPTION

Although we have not found any specific information regarding its reception that might reinforce our hypothesis, the film was highly controversial and criticized at the time of its release; not only for the harshness of the fights, but also for its philosophical message consisting in the vindication of individuality through punches.

It is in the second part of the footage, since the moment the 'Fight Club' becomes 'Project Mayhem', when that fight for individualism is distorted and ends up becoming a much more dangerous radical movement with even fascist features. As we can deduce only through its title definition, since the word 'mayhem' would be literally translated as "violent or extreme disorder; chaos."

It is true that it had some staunch defenders from the first moment, and that the film makes its position clear in the second half, when the narrator ends up notifying himself of the personality split that he suffers and clearly positions himself against Tyler and his project; becoming, from that moment, his main objective, to prevent it from being completed.

But, despite this evident judgment and position on what was considered good and what was considered bad, many ignored these details and radically opposed the film; some even going so far as to accuse it of apology for violence, terrorism and fascism. An interesting part of this misinterpretation of its message resulted in the immediate creation of fight and wrestling clubs throughout the United States, mimicking the film's nihilistic philosophy.

At the Venice festival it was harshly criticized and described as dangerous, predicting consequences similar to those of the premiere of *A Clockwork Orange* (a film that was also highly criticized at the time it was released, being censored, X rated in countries such as the US, and even banned its reproduction in the UK, because it was considered a dangerous influence on the youth of the time).

Likewise, it failed commercially. However, what did have a resounding success was its DVD release (very popular in the 90s), an edition that included great numerous extra contents.

So, despite its apparent initial failure, it soon became a cult film, considered today a cinema classic; and catapulted David Fincher's career as one of the most important filmmakers of the moment.

8. INTERTEXTUALITY

The most obvious intertextuality of the is the fact that it is a film adaptation of the eponymous novel published in 1996 by the American writer and journalist Chuck Palahniuk.

In 2016, two decades after the publication of his first installment and 17 years after the premiere of Fincher's adaptation that made him a cult author, Palahniuk published 'The Fight Club 2'. This second installment, devised directly in the graphic novel format, is located ten years after the end of the first one and presents us the perfectly normal, bland and daily life that "The Narrator" (medicated to control his personality disorder) leads along with Marla, who has become his wife, and their nine-year-old son.

The plot of this sequel is an important support in the demonstration of our hypothesis, since it will be Marla herself who, eager for action, tired of the monotony and nostalgic for the wildest part of her husband, begins to manipulate his medication with the intention to promptly wake up Tyler; fostering a situation that will soon get out of her hands.



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