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Fight Club: A Film Analysis
Bachelor's Diploma Thesis

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*I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently,
using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.*

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Author's signature

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1. Introduction

“The first rule of Fight Club is you do not talk about Fight Club” and “the first rule of Project Mayhem is you do not ask questions” (*Fight Club*), two rules the characters in *Fight Club* must obey, are going to be broken in this paper in order to properly analyze David Fincher’s “culturally most influential film” (Schreiber 4). Fincher explains his motives for shooting the film by saying: “I don’t know how much movies should entertain. To me, I am always interested in movies that scar” (Walker). And scar it did, as many critics and audiences alike were so shocked by the film’s graphic and unconventional nature that they misunderstood the film’s intended meaning, which is satire and comedy (“David Fincher Biography”). Enjoyment, as well as interpretation of *Fight Club* strongly depends on viewer’s sense of humor, which is why some thought the film was humorous and meaningful, whereas others called for its censorship (Crowdus 46). Elizabeth Kinder furthermore points out that “the deliberately shocking thematic content of *Fight Club* ... has distracted scholarly attention from analysis of its formal structure” (541), which is why this paper will delve deep into the film and attempt to analyze its real meaning. The film strongly rejects any formal conventions, which perhaps makes formally analyzing it a bit counter-intuitive, but this paper will attempt to do so nonetheless. As the acclaimed video-essayist Tony Zhou argues, Fincher is one of the best contemporary directors and his direction is “absolutely worth studying” (Zhou), which adds to the motives behind this paper.

The first few pages will deal with Fincher himself, the film’s production and its reception. This brief introduction will provide details about the film’s background and thus enable deeper apprehension of its meaning. The third and fourth sections of this paper will provide detailed analysis of the film’s content and form, with focus on the film’s cinematography and its themes and motifs. The analysis will provide arguments

of acknowledged scholars combined with this paper's own, but will also rely on journalistic sources such as interviews with the director and also few outstanding recent video essays. Whenever possible, there will be a direct quote from the film to support any arguments which will occur. The aim of this thesis is not to discover something new about the eighteen-year-old *Fight Club*, but rather to provide a unique perspective and analysis of the film.

2. David Fincher

It is certainly useful to know a filmmaker's professional as well as personal past experiences to properly analyze their work. Older and experienced directors understandably make different films from young and aspiring ones. Their personal lives also noticeably shape their style of directing, as some directors attended film school, while others did not or as some started experimenting with camera during childhood, while others learned to use it much later in life.

David Fincher became interested in art since early childhood, when he enjoyed drawing and photography (Salisbury). He got his first camera when only eight years old as a present from his parents and that was when he started making homemade videos ("David Fincher Biography"). He continued shooting amateur videos during his high-school years and when it came to choosing a university, he deliberately chose not to attend film school (Salisbury). Instead, he went on to work directly in the filmmaking business. At a low-level position, he worked in George Lucas's special-effects company called Industrial Light and Magic, where he contributed in creating special effects for blockbusters in the likes of *Return of the Jedi* or *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* ("David Fincher Biography"). Soon after, he began shooting commercials and music videos, many of which for the most sought-after brands and musicians (Salisbury). When he made a name for himself, he received his first offer for a feature film, which

was *Alien 3* (“David Fincher Biography”). Every aforementioned part of Fincher’s life was essential in forming his directorial style and attitude towards filmmaking. He practiced filmmaking since a very early age, which gave him an advantage in his early professional life. His choice to start working for Industrial Light and Magic right after high school, instead of going to a film school significantly influenced his attitude towards special effects, which are a vital part of his signature way of filmmaking and thus also *Fight Club*.¹

The most important milestone in his life, however, was filming *Alien 3*. The heads of Fox studios were looking for a young and small-time director, who would listen to their demands and comply with their constant meddling (Beyl, “Baptism by Fire”). Fincher’s vision of the film was “highjacked and tempered with,” (Beyl, “Baptism by Fire”) which resulted in his contempt for the studio, the industry and the film itself. He later said about the film: “No one hated it more than me; to this day, no one hates it more than me” (Salisbury). This experience made Fincher retreat back into the world of music videos and commercials, where he remained until he read the script for *Se7en*, which made him give feature filmmaking another chance (“David Fincher Biography”). This time, he made sure his vision would remain intact, which he achieved with the support of the film’s leading actors Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman, both of whom were already famous and highly demanded at that time, which gave them a certain leverage against the studio (Salisbury). The result was a critical and financial success (“*Se7en* (1995)”), which made Fincher reconsider staying in the filmmaking industry and continue with more projects, such as *The Game* or *Fight Club*.

Were it not for the unpleasant experience on the set of *Alien 3*, *Fight Club* could have been a completely different film, as Fincher would not have learned how to

¹ Fincher’s direction and cinematography in *Fight Club* will be further analyzed later in this paper.

manipulate the studio heads and producers to ensure his vision would remain intact. As a matter of fact, *Fight Club* was originally meant to be an independent low-budget film, but Fincher went to speak with the studio heads and told them: “I don't want to make the \$3m version of this; I want to crash planes, I want to blow up buildings and I want to do the thing that Hollywood really shouldn't do; material like this” (Salisbury). Because *Se7en* made him highly demanded and critically acclaimed, he was eventually given the permission to do what he wanted. Without the hardship he had to face on the set of his previous projects, which he now retrospectively calls “a baptism by fire,” *Fight Club* would most likely be a toned-down low-key film and Fincher's talent would remain constrained to the world of commercials and pop-music videos (Salisbury).

3. *Fight Club*

The film is an adaptation of a book of the same name by Chuck Palahniuk, but for the sake of this paper, the film will be treated as a text on its own. Furthermore, the film's nameless narrator will be, for the sake of this essay, referred to as Jack, as in his inner monologues he often compares himself to organs of a certain Jack, for example “I am Jack's broken heart” (*Fight Club*). The film follows Jack through his boring life until he meets Tyler, who finally puts some excitement into Jack's life when they open and participate in a Fight Club together. More men soon follow their footsteps until Tyler starts losing his mind and slowly turns the club into a guerilla terrorist network known as Project Mayhem. As Tyler's actions increasingly get out of hand, his relationship with Jack crumbles until they are divided. When Jack realizes Tyler's plans to demolish several skyscrapers, he begins to chase after him until he realizes that Tyler is actually not real, because he is a result of Jack's multiple personality disorder – his alter ego.

Fight Club was released in 1999 and first screened at the Venice Film Festival (Salisbury). The film has reached cult status since then, but its initial reception was overwhelmingly negative (Salisbury). The film very explicitly attacks convention, which was something the older critics at Venice Film Festival could not relate with (Salisbury). Furthermore, the film's studio handled marketing very poorly, as they targeted mainly martial arts fans, who did not appreciate the film's philosophical complexity and had problems with the film's homoerotic undertones (Salisbury). Apparently, mainstream audiences in the late nineteen-nineties were not ready for "the first film of the next century" (qtd. in Grønstad 1).

When the film was released on DVD, however, it's popularity rocketed among college students and cinephiles (Thompson 61). Contrary to the conservative mainstream audiences, the film's unconventional and radical messages resonated among the young students, who were drawn to the film because "society tells [them] that the idea is making as much money as possible, not to do something you're moved to do. It's refreshing to see something that says there is something more out there" (qtd. in Thompson 61). The reason the film resonates with viewers until this day is the film's topicality. Although the film was released eighteen years ago, the threat of consumerism and its damage on the quality of life is even bigger issue now than it was at the turn of the century as smartphones and internet form a significant part of modern culture. Fincher explains his motives for shooting the film by saying: "Some people go to the movies to be reminded that everything's OK ... I don't make those kinds of movies. That, to me, is a lie. Everything's not OK" (Walker).

As will be discussed later, there is a significant number of viewers and critics who misunderstood the film. This might be a result of their confusing the ideology of the antagonistic Tyler with the ideology of the film itself. Upon closer inspection, satire

can be found even in the most disturbing parts of the film. Fincher himself stated: “I’ve always thought people would think the film was funny. It’s supposed to be satire. A dark comedy” (“David Fincher Biography”). The film’s satirical message is often very well hidden, especially for a first-time viewer, because Fincher hid many clues in the film, which can be understood or noticed only upon repeated viewings. The film’s dark sense of humor is another reason the film was poorly received with conservative audiences.

Thematically, the film carries a strong resemblance to film noir with its dark and high-contrast cinematography combined with the gritty mise-en-scène and dry and often sarcastic voiceover. Marla, the film’s ever-smoking femme fatale, is another good example of a typical element of film noir. The film’s “focus on lower-middle-class disenfranchisement and an obsessive focus on the powerful potential of the heterosexual white male body” (Barker 179) furthermore resembles the elements of boxing films. Despite resembling these two cinematic genres, *Fight Club* seems to deviate from the definition of both. This is, among other things, caused by the film’s unique and constant breakage of the fourth wall. Breakage of the fourth wall is used relatively often in Hollywood cinema, but *Fight Club* does it differently. Jack and Tyler repeatedly talk directly to the audience, looking right in the camera, which is not uncommon in cinema, but they also seem to be aware they are in a film even when not directly addressing the audience. This is, for example, shown in the opening and closing scene of the film. In the opening scene, Tyler asks Jack if he would like to say a few words for the occasion, upon which Jack answers “I can’t think of anything” (*Fight Club*). Little more than two hours later, in the closing scene, when the plot returns to the same time and place as in the opening scene, Tyler asks the same question, but this time Jack says “I *still* can’t think of anything” (*Fight Club*). Tyler aptly calls this “flashback humor” (*Fight Club*)

which suggests the characters, or at least Tyler, are aware they are existing in a non-linear plot inside a movie.

It is not only the actors who break the fourth wall in the film, the director sort of does it too on at least one occasion. After the scene, in which Tyler threatens to kill a store clerk if he does not do something with his life, there is an explosion in a computer store, a result of Tyler's homework assignments in the form of many acts of vandalism. This vandalism is the beginning of Project Mayhem, which, from Jack's perspective, symbolizes Tyler's increasing megalomania and their growing apart. Immediately after this scene, there is an interlude – Tyler's monologue, in which he speaks about people not being defined by the things they own. This interlude symbolizes Tyler's growing megalomaniac content for society and during the monologue, the frames of the actual celluloid film begin to wobble and reveal the edges of the film reel. This is the director, together with the editor, communicating with the audience, telling them Tyler is spinning out of control.

Another cinematic genre the film touches on is punk cinema (Thompson 47). Stacy Thompson defines the term as having “a particular aesthetic that mimics punk music's speed, frenetic energy, anger, antiauthoritarian stance, irony, style, anomie, or disillusionment” (47). All of the above can be found in *Fight Club*, as the film uses fast camera movement and editing, deals with violence and anti-consumerism, and attacks modern culture and society. Furthermore, punk cinema tends to show “material traces of its production” (Thompson 49), which is apparent in the aforementioned Tyler's monologue when the edges of *Fight Club*'s film reel begin to show or when “cigarette burns” (*Fight Club*) appear at the top right corner of the screen as Jack describes Tyler's work process as a projectionist.

Fight Club's genre categorization has proven itself difficult, but it shares the most with the genre of punk cinema, as Tyler's ideology closely correlates to one of punk music and his house certainly symbolizes punk's aesthetics. Nevertheless, the film does not entirely fit in punk cinema's definition as its certain elements are in direct opposition with the ideology of punk cinema. To start with, punk's ideology says that anyone can and should create punk music or in this case punk cinema (Thompson 48). As a result of this, many punk musicians and directors could be total amateurs with minimal budget and still be successful punkers. David Fincher is certainly no amateur and the film's sixty-three-million dollar budget do not comply with punk's ideology (Thompson 62). Furthermore, punk should attack mainstream culture and criticize its own commodification, but *Fight Club* unintentionally promotes it (Thompson 64).² It is worth noting that for a film, which attacks convention and the mainstream, *Fight Club* ultimately follows cinematic conventions of Hollywood, as will be dealt with later when discussing consumerism and homosexuality.

4. Themes and Motifs

Fight Club can be interpreted in multiple different ways. Some viewers may see it as a drama about the search of meaning in life, others as an action film about underground fighting cult turned bad. Scholars usually interpret *Fight Club* as a critique of consumerism (Crowdus), hypermasculinity (Grønstad) or modern society (Thompson). The author of the film, however, intended it as a "satire; a dark comedy" ("David Fincher Biography"), which is something many critics and viewers alike seem to have missed because of the film's explicit attack on conventions and modern society, and the film's strong focus on violence. This multitude of different interpretations is

² The film's unintentional invitation to repeatedly consume the film will be dealt with later in this paper

also possibly caused by the film's variety of themes and motifs, many of which might elude viewers upon their first viewing of the film. Anti-consumerism, masculinity or violence are examples of the more obvious themes, however the film also deals with fascism, homosexuality or identity, all of which will be analyzed in further detail in the following pages.

Perhaps the film's only theme scholars have the same opinion about is consumerism and its negative impact on society as well as on masculinity of its members. Except for Tyler and Marla, who, due to their attitude and apparel, are certainly not representative members of modern society, the remaining characters in *Fight Club* seem to be victims of "inauthenticity and mediocrity of modern life" (Grønstad 5). These people, vast majority of whom are men, seem oblivious, or perhaps just indifferent, to the pain they live in due to the emptiness of their consumerist lifestyle, until they are united and enlightened by Tyler. He teaches the emotionally numb men, that fighting is a solution for their empty lives, because it will give them "meaningful sense of male identity" (Crowdus 48). In *Fight Club*, the men are not defined by their status or by their looks, they are all dissatisfied with their lives and they are presented the opportunity to channel this dissatisfaction by fighting with other men. As Jack puts it: "You weren't alive anywhere like you were [in *Fight Club*]" (*Fight Club*).

Nevertheless, there would be no Tyler without Jack. Jack is having a spiritual crisis and is disappointed with his "tiny life" (*Fight Club*) defined by material objects he owns. On top of that, he is working in a job he does not seem to enjoy to make money for buying more material objects. Tyler sums up this behavior by saying "Advertising has us ... working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need" (*Fight Club*). Material goods however fail to satisfy Jack and this repressed dissatisfaction becomes

the root for Jack's mental issues, including his multiple personality disorder and insomnia. The combination of his meaningless job together with his "enslavement to lifestyle consumerism" (Crowdus 46) depresses Jack so much he wishes he would die in a plane crash. Only after meeting Tyler the protagonist starts realizing he must free himself from the shackles of material possession. When Jack finds out he lost everything he had owned, he tells Tyler: "I had it all. I had a stereo that was very decent. A wardrobe that was getting very respectable. I was close to being complete" (*Fight Club*). The previous quote demonstrates Jack's values and how he defines himself with what he owns. Tyler responds by saying "fuck off with your sofa units. ... I say never be complete. I say stop being perfect. ... The things you own end up owning you" (*Fight Club*). The previous exchange between the two main characters illustrates their different outlook on life and its meaning. Tyler is strongly against consumerism and claims consumers are a "byproduct of a lifestyle obsession," which does not make sense in the context of man's "hunter-gatherer" nature (*Fight Club*). Furthermore, he dismisses Jack's notion of being defined by the material objects one owns by saying: "You're not how much money you have in the bank. You're not the car you drive. You're not the contents of your wallet. You're not your fucking khakis" (*Fight Club*).

One of the reasons Tyler despises consumerism so much is that he believes it distracts people from their roles in society. In her essay *Tiny Life: Technology and Masculinity in the Films of David Fincher*, Michele Schreiber supports Tyler's ideology by comparing the modern consumerist society with the pre-consumerist one. She points out that modern society encourages its members to play societal roles which are only "decorative and consumerist," (7) while, historically, people had to participate and be useful to society. Tyler wants to restore such historical society and societal roles, and so

he envisions the new world as “a prehistoric civilization of men” (Grønstad 6), where there is no place nor need for consume and he describes it to Jack as follows:

You’ll be stalking elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. You’ll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life. You’ll climb the thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower and when you look down, you’ll see tiny figures pounding corn, laying strips of venison in the empty car-pool lane of some abandoned superhighway. (*Fight Club*)

To achieve this, he establishes Project Mayhem, a guerilla terrorist cell, which, at first, commits small acts of vandalism on symbols of consumerism, but ultimately aims to change American and perhaps even global economy (Thompson 57) by demolishing buildings owned by credit-card companies, and thus installing “economic equilibrium” (*Fight Club*) by erasing everyone’s debt record. The film does not show the consequences of the demolitions, but it can be assumed that Tyler wanted to cause an economic collapse, which would return mankind to a simple, primal “hunter-gatherer” (*Fight Club*) society.

Consumerism and anti-consumerism are accompanied with a noticeable portion of irony in the film. It presents itself the most in the terms of the film’s production and it does so on more than one occasion. To start with, Fincher owes his success and reputation to his days as a director of commercials and pop music videos (“David Fincher Biography”), therefore shooting a film which explicitly attacks the culture of consume was an unexpected choice for him. Secondly, because of its plot twist and philosophical complexity, the film strongly invites for repeated viewings, which is in direct opposition to its anti-consumeristic message, because instead of discouraging the viewers from consume, it invites more consume, or rather “repeated consume of the same Hollywood commodity” (Thompson 62). The repeated consume of the same

Hollywood commodity is especially ironic in regards to the scene, where the members of Fight Club are given their homework assignments and a few of them are seen permanently damaging VHS cassettes in a video rental store with strong electromagnets, which signifies that movies are also part of the problem in the modern consumerist society and should be obliterated. Lastly, the film has spawned many lines of merchandise being sold and manufactured, including posters, Tyler's clothes and, most ridiculously of all, a bar of pink soap with the title of the film engraved on it (CineFix). It is important to note, that, most likely, the irony in terms of the film's production was not intentional by the authors of the film.

Violence is, arguably, the most obvious and apparent theme in the film. Not only is it present even in the film's title, but both the opening and closing scenes contain violence, which, metaphorically speaking, frames the entire film in violence (Kinder 551). It is also a theme, which received the biggest critical backlash, as many critics, as well as commercial viewers, misread its role in the film (Grønstad 8). These critics completely fail to see beyond the graphic nature of the film's violence and its consequences on human body, which they called "ugly," "stomach churning," "morally repulsive," and "dangerous" (qtd. in Crowdus 47). Their inability to distance themselves from the graphic scenes made them think that the violence is celebrated and even glamorized (Crowdus 47). Unfortunately, many commercial viewers also misread the film, which inspired them to create their own copycat Fight Clubs. John McCullough reacts to this misreading by claiming the film does not advocate such violent behavior, which he describes as "a masculine fantasy and a dystopic misogynist endgame" (46). The film thus ultimately admits, that violence falls short as a solution (Grønstad 6). Some critics were even more afraid the film would spawn copycat guerilla terrorist cells, but according to Gary Crowdus these people "seem to willfully ignore the film's

inherent criticisms of Tyler's terrorist actions" (48), which is delivered by Jack's narration throughout the entire third act, in which he explicitly disagrees with Tyler and even unsuccessfully tries to sabotage Project Mayhem's plans. In *So Good It Hurts*, Fincher himself is quoted dismissing the allegations that *Fight Club* promotes terrorism and destruction (Taubin 18).

It is worth noting that most the film's violent scenes have a certain dramatic or even comical context and they serve as a device for character development or as a signal for a turning point in the film's plot (Crowdus 47), and not as a mindless gratification of violence as some critics understood it. Three of the arguably most graphic scenes in the film support this Crowdus's claim, as all of them have deeper context than just unmotivated display of violence. These scenes are: when Jack beats himself in front of his boss, which serves a purely comical context; when Jack beats Angel Face, which signals a turning point of the plot and shows the change of dynamics between Tyler and Jack; and when Robert Paulsen is killed, which serves as a demonstration of Project Mayhem's megalomania and dehumanization³.

Crowdus furthermore defends his claim by discussing the choreography of the fights. He compares *Fight Club* with other action films of its era, whose violent scenes he describes as "conventionally stylized and physically sanitized, ... choreographed like raucous dance routines," whereas Fincher's violent scenes are full of "awkward grappling, wild roundhouse swings, head butting, kneeing and other amateurish wrestling maneuvers – the way guys who are not used to fighting would fight" (47). By depicting the violence realistically and awkwardly, and by showing its realistic consequences on the human body, the film gives up any intention of glamorizing it, unlike other contemporary action films, which tend to show almost invincible

³ Project Mayhem and its dehumanization will be analyzed in the section of this paper dealing with fascism

protagonists, whose actions tend to lack any serious or realistic consequences. Grønstad furthermore supports the notion that the film does not glamorize violence, even though he admits that *Fight Club* comes close to “celebrating the bruised and beaten male body” (5), by commenting on the film’s parody of “the nexus of masculinity and violence” (5). The element of parody is apparent in a fair amount of fight scenes, for example Jack and Tyler’s first fight with its awkward ear-punches, and Jack and Tyler’s last fight, which is shown from Jack’s perspective as very serious, but from the unbiased perspective of security cameras as a relentless self-destruction.

The way the characters encounter violence is also quite different from the contemporary films of the turn of the century made by critically acclaimed directors in the likes of Scorsese, Tarantino or Spielberg. In their films, as well as in the majority of any violent film, the characters encounter violence when “pursuing other ends and activities,” and therefore, it is “unavoidable yet accidental” (Grønstad 2). In Fincher’s *Fight Club*, on the other hand, violence is not accidental, but rather deliberate, however, still unavoidable, and the film focuses on “the teleology of the fight” (Grønstad 2). Because of Fincher’s unique attitude towards violence, *Fight Club* is called the first commercially successful film to successfully put violence, death and brutality within “an explicit philosophical framework” (Grønstad 5).

Closely related to the theme of violence is the theme of masculinity. The society, in which Tyler and Jack live in, deals with a crisis of masculinity, which is caused by “both feminization of masculinity and the culture of commodification” (Grønstad 9). The men in the film have become exhausted by working as “white-collar slaves” (Thompson 56) and their masculine identity has been rendered impotent by their consumerist lifestyles as it becomes defined by material possessions instead of societal or gender roles. The loss of masculine identity and its replacement with consume is also

apparent in this quote: “We used to read pornography. Now it is the Horchow collection” (*Fight Club*). In one *Fight Club* session, Tyler has this to say about the issue:

Man, I see in *Fight Club* the strongest and smartest men who have ever lived. I see all this potential. And I see it squandered. Goddamn it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables, slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don’t need. We’re the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War, no Great Depression. Our Great War is a spiritual war. Our Great Depression is our lives. We have all been raised on television to believe that one day we’d all be millionaires and movie gods, and rock stars, but we won’t. We are slowly learning that fact. And we are very, very pissed off. (*Fight Club*)

Jack has clearly fallen victim to such degeneration of manhood, even if he does not fully consciously realize it. As a result of this emasculation, his subconscious created an idealized hypermasculine “homme fatale” (Lindsay) alter ego without Jack’s notice. Tyler envisions a new masculinity, in which “virile, aggressive ... and anti-capitalist” (Barker 181) individuals are the most valuable members of society. This suggests Tyler believes “men have no enduring qualities outside of their physicality, resistance and affirmation” (Grønstad 12). Such new masculinity is an extreme overreaction to current feminization of society, which was, according to Jennifer Barker, somewhat topical in cinema at the turn of the century (171). Others, however, claim that the threat of a feminized society is a theme more than hundred years old (Grønstad 4), and was caused by historical and social changes, for example when in 19th century “socialization and education of children increasingly became the responsibility of women” (Grønstad 8). Tyler also seems to think that absent fathers and single

mothers are to blame for the generation of emasculated men, when he says: “We are a generation of men raised by women. I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer we need⁴” (*Fight Club*). In America, gender anxiety started culminating as a result of the collapse of the American dream following the loss of Vietnam War (McCullough 46). Vietnam War, among other factors, gave rise to such social movements as Civil Rights Movement or feminist movement, which noticeably shifted the dynamics of gender roles in the United States (McCullough 46).

Emasculation appears also as a literate threat and a means of ridicule. When Project Mayhem is formed, its members threaten someone with violent castration on two different occasions. Firstly, when they ambush police commissioner Jacobs at a public restroom, which is ultimately revealed only as a threat, a scare tactic. The second time, on the other hand, is not meant as a mere scare tactic and it takes place at a police station, whose members have already been recruited by Tyler. Jack therefore almost became literally emasculated, something this film suggests is one of the worst things that can happen to a man, but manages to escape. Another and perhaps the last time emasculation takes place is at the meetings of Remaining Men Together, a support group for patients diagnosed with testicular cancer. The character of Robert Paulsen, a former bodybuilder who developed enormous feminine breasts due to testicular cancer therapy, can be interpreted as a ridicule of an emasculated man.

Bob had his testicles removed. Then hormone therapy. He developed bitch tits, because his testosterone was too high and his body upped the estrogen. That was where I fit, between those huge sweating tits that hung enormous the way you’d think of God’s as big. (*Fight Club*)

⁴ The homoerotic undertones of this quote will be analyzed in the coming paragraphs dealing with homosexuality

Even from the language of this particular Jack's piece of inner monologue it is apparent how emasculated men, at least in Jack's point of view, are to be perceived: feminine, ridiculous and with no dignity. Despite Bob still being incredibly muscular from his bodybuilding days, the simple fact he has feminine breasts deems him something lesser than a man in Jack's eyes, as apparent from the inner monologue. Bob's "bitch tits" (*Fight Club*) therefore function in the film as a motif of emasculation, whereas testicles function as a motif of masculinity and their loss also signifies emasculation.

Fight Club seems to be concerned with masculinity to the point that it is not difficult to pick up on the film's explicit homosexual energy between the two main protagonists. Scholars seem to more or less agree that violence functions as "a means of ... relieving the homoerotic tension in a way deemed acceptable to mainstream sensibilities" (Grønstad 17). Stacy Thompson agrees that violence substitutes homoerotic intimacy, and further adds that each fight is concluded with an embrace, because "men can touch one another intimately only with their fists" (59). She, however, also criticizes the film's dismissing of Jack's possible homosexuality at the end of the film, which she blames on Hollywood and its prohibition of gay sexuality in film (Thompson 58). Ironically, given the film's anti-conventional stance, it ultimately confines with Hollywood conventions about male sexuality and substitutes homosexuality with a conventional heterosexual romance between Jack and Marla.

Any indications of Jack's possible homosexuality start at the beginning of the film, at Remaining Men Together. There, the group supports and fosters emotional as well as physical intimacy between men, which, for the first time, cures Jack's insomnia (Thompson 60). Jack loses the ability to cry and therefore to sleep only after a woman, Marla Singer, comes into his life. Since then, Marla will interfere with Jack's homosexual behavior quite often. The relationship Tyler and Jack have seems explicitly

homoerotic (Thompson 58), at least upon first viewing of the film, when viewers are still oblivious to the fact that Jack and Tyler are the same person⁵. Their homosexual bonding is most apparent in the scene, in which Tyler is having a bath with Jack sitting only a few meters away, washing his bloodied knuckles. In this scene, both men discuss their growing up with absent fathers and the pointlessness of heterosexual relationships. As the two men discuss important lifetime milestones, they get to marriage and Jack says: “[I] can’t get married, I’m a thirty-year-old boy” upon which Tyler responds: “We’re a generation of men raised by women. I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer we need” (*Fight Club*).

Given the undeniable homosexual energy between Jack and Tyler, one might be surprised with the sudden intimacy between Jack and Marla towards the end. Thompson argues, that Marla’s presence is a “narrative necessity to satisfy the Hollywood aesthetic: the creation of a heterosexual couple, Tyler-Marla and then Jack-Marla” (59). The heterosexual relationship Tyler and Marla briefly share is “parodic and patently ridiculous” (Thompson 59) as it is usually accompanied with one-line punchlines, for example when Marla tells Tyler “[she has not] been fucked like that since grade school” (*Fight Club*) or when Tyler steps out of his room, only seconds after having finished having sex with Marla, wearing nothing but a yellow dishwasher glove, upon which he asks Jack: “Do you want to finish her off?” (*Fight Club*). It is therefore even bigger surprise, when Jack seems to develop romantic feelings for Marla at the closing scene of the film given the negative representation of heterosexual relationships. Elizabeth Kinder claims the romance is “a result of exhaustion, circumstance, and proximity” (553) rather than heterosexual attraction. The sudden heterosexual intimacy between

⁵ Although Tyler physically does not exist, this paper will analyze his presence in the perspective of a first-time viewer, who is still unaware of this fact, in order to properly analyze his and Jack’s homoerotic relationship.

Jack and Marla “robs the demolition of the credit card company skyscrapers and the film’s explicit homoeroticism of their power” (Thompson 59-60).

Further evidence of Jack’s possible homosexuality surface when Angel Face enters the story. He is among the first members to enter Project Mayhem and quickly rises to become Tyler’s protégé of sorts. With Tyler’s rising megalomania, Jack fears he might lose his relationship with Tyler and become replaced. This is most evident at the end of the scene, where the members of Project Mayhem threaten police commissioner Jacobs with castration. At the end of this scene, Tyler is seen praising Angel Face, to which Jack reacts with displeasure. Following this scene, in one of Fight Club meetings, Jack fights Angel Face and savagely devastates his face, defying the rules of Fight Club, which say: “The third rule of Fight Club: Someone yells ‘stop,’ goes limp, taps out, the fight is over” (*Fight Club*). The fight furthermore figures as an important plot-turning device, as it confirms Jack and Tyler’s growing apart over Project Mayhem, resulting in Tyler leaving Jack. It is therefore worth noting, that Marla was not what pulled Jack away from Tyler, rather, it was Tyler’s increasing megalomania, which again proves Jack’s possible homosexuality.

Tyler’s, and therefore also Project Mayhem’s, megalomania is another aspect of the film worth investigating, as his ideology strongly resembles that of historic fascist leaders. Jennifer Barker analyzes *Fight Club* “within the framework of socio-political discourse on fascism, particularly Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and Mussolini’s *The Doctrine of Fascism*” (171) and she came up with some striking parallels. In her essay “A Hero Will Rise”: The Myth of the Fascist Man in *Fight Club* and *Gladiator*, she introduces the presence of fascism in the two films as follows:

Fight Club has the appearance of a liberal agenda, advocating a revolutionary fervor branded as rebellion against oppressive fascistic forces, but which

actually masks an ideology similar to early forms of fascism. Both [films] source their opposition in the anger of underprivileged males, who feel they have been disenfranchised of their glorious futures by a vapid and ineffectual bourgeois, yet neither film demonstrates why these men deserve power. (Barker 179)

As Barker said, the members of Fight Club, and later also Project Mayhem, eventually resemble the oppression they plot against. These members joined Tyler because they were dissatisfied with their lives, where they felt dehumanized and oppressed, perhaps even enslaved (Grønstad 9) by corporations and bureaucracy (Barker 179). Tyler promises a solution for these men in the form of rebellion, however, ultimately, the members of Project Mayhem are forced to give up their lives, names, hair and clothes – their identities – which makes them the same uniform dehumanized mindless drones as they had been before, only this time they are called “space monkeys” (*Fight Club*). Even more importantly so, they lose their freedom as they blindly follow their leader who forbids them to question his orders, which is something they unanimously repeat in fixed mantras such as “the first rule of Project Mayhem is you do not ask questions” (*Fight Club*). This behavior is, according to Barker, reminiscent of fascistic political agenda (180).

Fascist nations tend to be led by “a charismatic leader who epitomizes the ‘new’ man and virility of the nation, and who controls the country as the head of state, church, military, and family” (Barker 172), which in the film is embodied by Tyler. For the disenfranchised men, Tyler symbolizes the “liberator of nations and the people” (Barker 182). Portrayed by the charismatic and attractive Brad Pitt, Tyler manages to seduce and manipulate the members of Fight Club and Project Mayhem to his agenda, Jack says about this: “Sooner or later, we all became what Tyler wanted us to be” (*Fight Club*). Tyler’s space monkeys are unconditionally loyal to him, even Jack says: “In Tyler we

trusted” (*Fight Club*), which implies people almost treated him like a deity. Together, their aim is to forcibly replace the “weak, passive, ineffectual and decadent liberal government” with “vital, virile, aggressive, and militaristic” leadership (Barker 172).

Fight Club also utilizes another fascist tactic, which is “replacing political discussion and critique with the spectacle of a hysterical mass unity [and by] aestheticizing violence” (Barker 171), which substitutes any actual political action (Barker 179). Fascistic political agenda also requires the feeling of freedom through submission and “misconstruction of the self in terms of an ideal other” (Barker 180), something which can be seen happening to the members of Project Mayhem as they seem to willingly give up their identities and completely submit to Tyler. Their submission to his agenda is marked with a chemical burn in the shape of Tyler’s lips, which the members, as well as Jack, have to endure in order to learn to submit to pain. This process seems to free them from the human cycle of life (Barker 182) and demonstrates they are willing to put their lives in Tyler’s hands. Not only are they willing to put their lives at stake, but dying actually seems to glorify them, which can be seen when Robert Paulsen is killed and one of the space monkeys says: “I understand. In death, a member of Project Mayhem has a name. His name is Robert Paulsen” (*Fight Club*). “His name is Robert Paulsen” immediately becomes a mantra, that the space monkeys start chanting and repeating in unison, as for them it means that if they die for Project Mayhem, they stop being nameless space monkeys and start having a name to inspire others to follow.

Because of their totalitarian fascistic undertones, the mantras in *Fight Club* might be considered as one of the film’s significant motifs. Another important mantra the space monkeys often use is “the first rule of Project Mayhem is you do not ask questions” (*Fight Club*). This specific mantra symbolizes another important aspect of

fascism, which is silencing. Silencing is present ever since the film's opening scene, where Jack finds himself with a gun in his mouth, unable to speak (Barker 179). Barker argues that Jack, as well as the space monkeys, desire being dominated and silenced, she even suggests Jack is addicted to it (179-180). The silencing continues when Tyler forbids Jack from speaking to Marla about him.

It is also worth noting, that not only does Tyler resemble a fascist leader, but the members of Fight Club and later also the space monkeys resemble fascist soldiers. The space monkeys have a striking resemblance to the modern skinheads and neo-Nazis (Crowdus 48) as they wear predominately wear black and have shaved heads. Their militaristic sabotage and strong focus on hardening their bodies (Barker 182) furthermore resemble behavior of fascist soldiers. Barker explains, that, historically, fascist soldiers spent great amount of time hardening their bodies in order to become less feminine (182), which is in concordance with what the Fight Club members do, as discussed in the previous section of this paper dealing with masculinity.

The last important and prevalent theme in the film is the one of identity. Some of the previous paragraphs of this paper dealt with masculine or sexual identity, but the film raises interesting questions about one's identity in general. Jack is noticeably dissatisfied with himself due to his empty life and dehumanizing job, as discussed previously in this paper. Due to his dissatisfaction, Jack develops insomnia, and later also multiple personality disorder. His identity issues can however be traced even further than that – to his business trips. Jack's job is to travel around the country and apply "the formula" (*Fight Club*), another important motif in the film. The formula signifies how dehumanizing his company can be. "Take the number of vehicles in the field: A. Multiply it by the probable rate of failure: B. Multiply the result by the average out-of-court settlement: C. A times B times C equals X. If X is less than the cost of a

recall, we don't do one" (*Fight Club*). By using the formula, the corporation Jack works for reduces the value of human life to potential profit or loss, to numbers and figures. This leaves him not only morally compromised, but it also dehumanizes himself, as he is only a mindless drone who applies the formula and decides whose life is worth anything based on the potential financial loss for his company. Jack, being the agent of the formula, often travels and thus finds himself displaced in time and space, as well as in society (Schreiber 8). These business trips combined with his insomnia make him confused every time he wakes up at a different airport. Jack describes his constant confusion in the following quote:

You wake up at SeaTac, SFO, LAX. You wake up at O'Hare, Dallas Fort Worth, BWI. Pacific, Mountain, Central. Lose an hour, gain an hour. ... This is your life and it's ending one minute at a time. You wake up at Air Harbor International. If you wake up at a different time, in a different place, could you wake up as a different person? (*Fight Club*).

Furthermore, on these business trips, Jack is surrounded by "single-serving" (*Fight Club*) objects. As discussed in the previous part of this paper dealing with consumerism, Jack is defined by the objects he owns, and so he struggles wearing only the same clothes and eating the same single-serving food.

Jack's struggle with his identity is most evident throughout the first act of the film. Not only are the business trips there, but, more importantly, Jack also starts attending the support groups. Jack's impotence is apparent when, in one of the support-group sessions, he is imagining his spiritual animal, which he is instructed to envision in an imaginary cave. His spiritual animal is penguin, a bird which is incapable of flight, something which symbolizes Jack's own entrapment (Grønstad 10). During the support-group sessions, as well as with the remainder of the film, Jack does not present his true

name, which shows his confusion about his real identity (McCullough 46). Instead, he creates fake personas, each with a different fake name and with a different fake deadly disease. The split of Jack's psyche into more personas seems to cure Jack's insomnia, until Marla Singer starts attending the groups as well. "Marla Singer is the catalyst for the psychic split that occurs in the narrator" (Kinder 542) by threatening to expose Jack's fake personas at the support groups and by confronting him about not telling her his name.

At this exact scene occurs one of the easily missed "spliced-in" (Kinder 549) frames of Tyler. Tyler's identity has not inhabited Jack's body yet, but by the occurrence of these frames, it is apparent that Tyler tries to surface and take control. These spliced-in frames occur exactly when someone says a word, which defines Tyler's "nature" (Kinder 549). The first time Tyler flashes on the screen is when Jack is operating a photocopier and he says "everything is a copy of a copy" (*Fight Club*). Later appearances include when Jack's doctor mentions the word pain, when someone at the support groups mentions strength and when Jack says he cannot sleep. Since Tyler and Jack share the same body, they truly are a copy of one another. Pain and strength are things Tyler uses to regain his and the Fight Club members' masculinity, as discussed before. Sleep defines Tyler, because he can only take control over Jack's body when Jack is sleeping.

The spliced-in images are a part of the film's motif surrounding celluloid film. Tyler works at night as a projectionist and he splices-in single frames of pornography into children's films and they do not consciously notice it, but their subconscious does, which is exactly the same as with *Fight Club*'s viewers and the spliced-in frames of Tyler. Furthermore, Tyler describes how the films he is projecting come in more reels than one, which means he has to seamlessly switch between them in the middle of the

projection and no member of the audience can notice. This “changeover” (*Fight Club*) symbolizes how Jack and Tyler switch control of their shared body without anyone even noticing.

When Jack kept repressing his dissatisfaction and misery, Tyler finally became alive. Amy Taubin said about this that “Jack is so filled with self-loathing and repressed rage he’s desperate to get out of his own skin and into someone else’s” (18). Even though Tyler tries to surface many times in the first act of the film, he is unable to do so, until Jack begins fantasizing about dying in an airplane collision, therefore it might be argued that the final creation of Tyler was a subconscious survival tactic of sorts, Tyler wanted to save Jack (McCullough 51-52). He symbolizes Jack’s subconscious, his innermost desires, the id to Jack’s superego (Thompson 57). What entails after Tyler appears on screen is a “cautionary tale about the danger that ensues when the superego fails to keep the id in check” (Thompson 60). In one scene, Tyler is speaking to Jack from beneath him, from the basement of the house they live in and he puts words into Jack’s mouth as he is having a heated discussion with Marla, and Tyler tells Jack to say to Marla the things Jack would not normally have the courage to say. This scene represents the communication between the subconscious id speaking from beneath the conscious to the superego (McCullough 51).

Elizabeth Kinder compares Tyler’s creation to the one of Dr. Frankenstein’s monster, as both creators intended to create “a thing of beauty and distinction,” but both “ultimately recoil in horror from [their] creature” (542). When Tyler’s megalomania went overboard, Jack needed to solidify his own identity and thus take back the charge over his own body. Similar to *Frankenstein’s* monster-hunt at the end of the book, Jack goes “hunting” for Tyler. The fight between the two identities is shown in the garage fight scene, which contrasts Jack’s point of view, which shows Tyler beating Jack and

throwing him down some flight of stairs, with an unbiased view from security cameras, which shows Jack inflicting this damage to himself. This identity struggle comes to an end when Jack realizes the monster is not hurting him, but that the monster lies within and he attempts suicide. Although the film shows Tyler dying, the way Jack behaves after he gets rid of Tyler, specifically the way he communicates with the space monkeys, suggests that even though Tyler is dead, he left some part of himself in Jack's mind. The closing scene symbolically underlines the film's theme of search for one's identity by playing a song by Pixies at the background called *Where Is My Mind*.

5. Cinematography analysis

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Fincher had been an experienced director by the time he shot *Fight Club*. Not only had his directorial skills been honed and established on the set of music videos and television commercials, but he also directed three big-budget feature films before he began production on *Fight Club* ("David Fincher"). When filming his previous projects, he developed several signature directorial trademarks, such as motivated camera movement, minimal use of close-ups (Zhou) or theatrical lighting (Beyl, "Baptism by Fire"). Many of his directorial choices are made to achieve maximal authenticity by using "pure visual-storytelling" and he puts "substance before the style" (The Film Guy). All the aforementioned trademarks were used when filming *Fight Club*.

Another trademark of his is sophisticated and story-motivated camera movement and placement (Zhou). Fincher uses as little handheld footage as possible, as he likes his camera to possess certain "omniscience" (Zhou). The camera in *Fight Club* is very "kinetic" (Beyl, "Capturing the Zeitgeist"), while stabilized and supported by computer-

generated imagery⁶. This eliminates the feeling of a human operating the camera and allows for an omniscient camera movement and placement. CGI-supported camerawork allows for said omniscience by defying the rules of physics when it travels through the ground during the opening scene or when it enters impossible places, such as a bag of chips in a wastepaper basket in Jack's office. Another purpose CGI serves in the film is representation of Jack's train of thought (Taubin). In the opening scene, Jack is describing Project Mayhem's plan to demolish several buildings of credit-card companies. His thoughts jump from one idea to another and another, and Fincher depicts this by using extremely fast camera movement, which can travel down multiple stories of a building, enter its underground parking lot through several feet of solid ground and then travel through numerous impenetrable obstacles into another building. All of the above would not be possible without CGI and Fincher used it order to bring the audiences closer to Jack's mind. The opening credits bring the viewers literally into Jack's mind, which is portrayed as an CGI journey along Jack's nerve synapses in his brain.

When filming *Fight Club*, omniscience provided a cinematic challenge of sorts, because the film's narrator is highly unreliable, but the viewers realize that only in the third act of the film. The challenge was preserving omniscience in scenes with Tyler, because the audience, together with Jack, do not know he is only a figment of Jack's split psyche. Fincher dealt with this by hiding several clues in plain sight, which might escape viewer's eye upon first viewing of the film. One of these clues are "spliced-in" (Kinder 549) single-frame images of Tyler, occurring during the first act of the film. In the first act, the viewers do not know what Tyler looks like yet, and so many of them miss this clue. Other clues are presented verbally by the narrator, which, again,

⁶ From this point, computer-generated imagery will be abbreviated as CGI

demonstrates Jack's unreliability as a narrator since the verbal clues are predominantly pieces of Jack's inner monologue. During the film, Jack says: "I know this, because Tyler knows this," or when he first meets Tyler on the plane, he says, astonished: "We have the *exact* same briefcase" (*Fight Club*). Subtle and unrecognizable for the first-time viewers, these clues proved to be the only way of preserving omniscience when it comes to portraying Jack and Tyler together.

The film carries a certain edgy aesthetic, which is not surprising given the film's rebellious, anarchist and punk undertones. Even Scott Rudin, producer of several Fincher's films, has said about Fincher: "He has an anarchist's mentality. He likes to blow up systems" (Rebello). One way the director achieved this aesthetic is by using a cold color palette and high-contrast lighting. Given the film was shot in a pre-digital era, where color-grading is as easy as clicking a mouse, the distinctive aesthetic is certainly impressive. Among the many bonus materials on the film's DVD, there is a comparison of multiple scenes before and after color correction, and some of them, for example the one where Jack's boss confronts Jack about leaving Fight Club posters in a photocopier, which is followed by Jack's dark threat of shooting everyone in the office, seem to lose their gravity when not colored in the cold high-contrast look the final version of the film has.

There is a big contrast between the scenes of Jack's boring empty civilian life with the ones from the Fight Club basement or Tyler's house. The place where Jack feels entrapped and depressed the most is without a doubt the office he works in. The scenes taking place there are colored in the shades of cold green, everything is evenly lit, the setting feels bland and sterile. The people in the frame are quiet and motionless, which again adds to the blandness of the scene. The scenes in the basement, however, are in direct opposition to those mentioned before, because at the fight club meetings,

Jack feels “alive” like nowhere else (*Fight Club*). The basement is designed to have low ceiling and it is constantly full of moving people, which fills the set and frame with life and energy. The lighting in the basement is very minimal, but high-contrast, leaving much of the frame in darkness. The color scheme is a bit warmer, in shades of yellow. The same applies to the house Tyler lives in, because they are both places which represent anarchy and non-conformity, but also where Jack feels most alive. Furthermore, Fincher decided to shoot these scenes with wide-angle lens, so the audience can see “the environment the characters are operating in” (*The Film Guy*). By shooting a scene like this, the viewers can learn more about the characters even when they are not speaking. It prevents the audience from getting disconnected from the narrative.

The edgy aesthetic is not only visual, but also sonic. Instead of opting for a traditional orchestral scoring for the film, Fincher hired the Dust brothers to make industrial trip-hop soundtrack, which underscores the entire film and helps set the mood and atmosphere to be highly unconventional and sometimes even unnerving. The score is accompanied with Oscar-nominated sound design (“A Hit in the Ear”). Fincher believes that sound is half the moviegoing experience (Salisbury) and the strong emphasis on its quality shows itself when watching the film. It is most noticeable in the fight scenes, whose sound is close to hyper-realistic. The sound designers, together with Fincher, were not satisfied with the standard stock punch sounds available, so they recorded their own sounds by punching dead meat full of walnuts with their fists and baseball bats, and then recorded it in a concrete basement and later adjusted the sound using an equalizer to make the sound more real (“A Hit in the Ear”). The realistic sound design further contributed to the critical backlash of viewers, who were shocked by the film’s graphic fight scenes.

6. Conclusion

This paper provided a brief section concerning the author of the film David Fincher. Inspection of his professional career before he filmed *Fight Club* helps explain why the film looks the way it does and why it generated the public response it did. In the following section it summarized the plot, informed about the film's reception and briefly contemplated about the difficulty of classifying its genre. After that, in the third section of the paper, there is a thorough analysis of the film's formal aspects, specifically its themes and motifs, for example consumerism, violence, or homosexuality. Lastly, in the fourth section, there was an analysis of the film's cinematography and how it influences and shapes the intended meaning. As stated in the introduction, the aim of this thesis was not to discover something new about the film, but to provide a unique analysis. The analysis proved the film very complex, especially in the terms of themes and motifs, plot and philosophy. *Fight Club* is a film, which has to be seen repeatedly, because with the knowledge of Tyler's true identity, the plot and the themes suddenly signify something else than what it did on first viewing. One of the messages of this paper is that people should not be offended and put off by *Fight Club*'s graphicness and unconventionality, and instead try to figure out the film's real intended meaning.

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8. Résumé in English

This Bachelor's thesis aims to properly analyze David Fincher's *Fight Club*. First, the paper briefly introduces the author and the background of the film's production. Secondly, in the main section, it analyzes the film's themes and motifs together with its cinematography. The paper includes argumentation from noted scholars as well as its own, but also relies on information from journalistic sources and noteworthy video essays. The aim of the paper is to provide an analysis with new argumentation, with some help from the argumentation of noted scholars, which will be supplemented and explained in the context of this paper.

9. Resumé v češtině

Tato bakalářská práce poskytuje důkladnou analýzu *Klubu Rváčů* od Davida Finchera. Nejdříve stručně poskytne reálie ze života autora a z natáčení zmíněného filmu. V hlavní části se poté tato práce zabývá analýzou témat, motivů a kinematografie *Klubu Rváčů*. Tato práce poskytuje jak svou vlastní argumentaci, tak tu od významných akademiků. Mezi další zdroje patří žurnalistické články a pár mimořádných video esejí. Cílem této práce je poskytnout analýzu filmu z nové perspektivy s občasnou pomocí od jiných akademiků, jejichž poznatky budou doplněny a vysvětleny v kontextu této práce.