Fight Club - Book Review

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Fight Club by Chuck Palahniuk (published in 1996 by Random House) presents the body as an important site at which power and resistance are both registered – in the violent form of destruction.
Fight Club is a text which attempts to depict issues of masculine identity in a capitalist consumer society where the class/wealth hierarchy is extremely divided and unequal. The narrator, unnamed in the novel, experiences a 'rebirth' in masculinity caused by the manifestation of Tyler Durden, a personality that embodies the narrator's subconscious desire for essentialist notions of a masculine identity. The 'body' has strong significance throughout Fight Club, and is portrayed as a site of both power and resistance through the mode of destruction.

Fight Club starts with the narrator and his life. His "home life (and identity) is created by consumer goods" (Muller 2010, QUT Blackboard), he's an insomniac (showing that he has...
no control over his body), hates his dead-end job as a "recall campaign officer" (Palahniuk 1996, 31) and feels trapped and mistreated by society and disconnected from his identity (Muller 2010), until Tyler Durden appears.

The first obvious act of identity destruction occurs when the narrator's apartment is blown up, and non-coincidently after his first meeting with Tyler Durden. The destruction of his apartment leaves the narrator feeling confused and lost, as if a part of him has been dismembered. The narrator feels as if his destroyed belongings were a part of him, his body, of his person.

"That was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinets were me. The plants were me. The television was me. It was me that blew up (Palahniuk 1996, 111).

After meeting in a bar, Tyler Durden and the narrator fight in the parking lot which marks their first destructive acts upon the body. Pain leads to exhilaration and they sit bloodied and blissful after their brute encounter – empowered (Giroux 2000). Then moves in with Tyler, a character who "represents the redemption of masculinity repackaged as the promise of violence in the interests of social and political anarch
This initial fight leads them to fighting each night in the parking lot, then drawing of male participants, and eventually to the bar's basement for the beginning of Fight Club, new religion and secret society for males who want to reclaim their instincts as hunters within a society that has turned them into consumers. Fight Club provides a space in which men can transcend the reality of their lifestyle, their jobs, and their bodies begins to present the body as a site of power and resistance to its followers, through violence and destruction.

For Tyler, physical violence becomes the necessary foundation for masculinity, as "Self-improvement isn't the answer... self-destruction is the answer" (Palahniuk 1996, 49). Tyler befriends the narrator and encourages him to engage his primal instincts, virility and the flesh, the body and control. "[M]aybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves," (Palahniuk 1996, 52) the narrator considers. These attitudes and beliefs resist the ideal consumer-driven society that the novel illustrates, and in doing so, empowers the characters.
Tyler and the narrator begin a journey, along with the members of fight club, to re-engage with their hunter/protector backgrounds and fully envelop the essentialist ideas of masculinity. Tyler emphasizes throughout the novel the importance of pain and destruction of the body as a means of experience, and hints that the masculine identity can only be reclaimed through the literal destruction of their present selves (Giroux 2000). Tyler attempts to portray his body as a symbol of destructive power, resisting consumer culture and the pitfalls of the feminine.

"Disaster is a natural part of evolution, toward tragedy and dissolution. I'm breaking my attachment to physical power and possessions; because only through destroying myself can I discover the greater power of my spirit" (Palahniuk 1996, 110).

Fight Club presents the body as an important site at which power and resistance registered in the form of destruction. Through destruction of the body, Tyler and narrator resist the ideals of society and experience power. During Fight Club (and Project Mayhem) members experience power through their destructive and resistant acts against society and the pain they inflict on their collective bodies. The body, in its newly reborn, masculine physicality, is a site/weapon of violent and destructive power, being a site for physical and social resistance. The circle and themes are evident.

Tyler initiates the narrator further into his destructive principles by pouring corrosive lye onto a kiss on his hand. "In retrospect when the reader understands that Tyler is not a physical entity but just a figment of the narrator's mind, this scene is especially powerful (Fight Club 2001 xroads.virginia.edu/~MA02/freed/fightclub/intro.htm). The pain the narrator undergoes is a test, proof of his endurance, his ability to allow this self-destruction on his body. "Come back to the pain," Tyler says, "don't shut this out" (Palahniuk 1996, 75).

"Violence in this instance signals its crucial function in both affirming the natural fierceness of men and providing them with a concrete experience that allows them to connect at some primal level" (Giroux 2000, Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: Fight Club, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence).
Throughout Fight Club, the body becomes the representation of destruction, power and resistance. The body, in its physical form, loses its defining edges through insomnia (the narrator), becomes battered, broken and scarred through self and collective destruction (narrator, Tyler, fight club), decays and eventually dies (terminally ill support group, Chloe, Bob). It is also seen to become developed and defined through physical exertion. Fight Club also presents the possibility of the body being shared by two separate selves, as seen with the relationship between the narrator and Tyler Durden. The narrator says, "We both use the same body but at different times" (Palahniuk 1996, 164).

Tyler and the narrator epitomise the conscious/sub(un)conscious parts of the self. Muller says that, "Tyler enacts the narrator's rejection of his society and consumer driven lifestyle. Tyler acts upon the narrator's sub(un)conscious desires for retribution and resistance from a world that he finds meaningless. "Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete" narrator says on page 46 (Palahniuk 1996). Tyler embodies the narrator's ideas of masculinity by being powerful, resistant and destructive, and sets out to "destroy the system that destroys them" (Muller 2010, QUT Blackboard).

Fight Club portrays its members as being reflexive sado-masochists, men who feel empowered by self-destruction. "Reflexive sado-masochism allows the individual himself as victim while also feeling powerful because of his ability to endure pain. It becomes desirable" (Fight Club 2001, Fight Club Introduction). Reflexive sado-masochism allows the fractured individual (the narrator, Tyler, Bob) to inscribe history on their bodies and express the ephemeral nature of salvation through violence and pain.

"Inflicting pain on the body becomes a means of exhibiting endurance through visual signifiers like blood, cuts, and bruises. Wounding the self is a way to experience the
certainty of existence known only through pain" (Fight Club 2001, Fight Club Introduction).

Throughout the text, Tyler attempts to portray the philosophy of regeneration through violence, and endeavours to emphasize the importance of pain to the narrator's life experience: "Without pain, without sacrifice, you would have nothing" (Palahniuk 1996, 78). Tyler's philosophy on regeneration through violence demonstrates 'the body' as a site of both power and resistance through the mode of destruction, and the narrator demonstrates his understanding of rebirth through violence by describing how after a fight "you feel saved" (Palahniuk 1996, 51). Tyler furthers this notion by saying, "Only after disaster can we be resurrected" (Palahniuk 1996, 70).

Tyler Durden and the narrator in the 1999 film adaptation

Fight Club ends with the narrator shooting himself in order to destroy Tyler, his alter-ego or schizoid personality. The infliction of this violence to destroy a manifestation of the narrator's mind is the way in which the narrator is able to forge a connection between the real and the unreal. Throughout the novel, violence is used as a necessary means by which the men in fight club feel 'saved,' and the narrator is reborn as the hunter/protector as he is saved from a capitalist consumer-driven society. The idea of regeneration through violence is then applied to the end, as, in order to 'save' himself, the narrator has a part of himself, leading readers to question whether the narrator can ever be a whole and 'healed' individual again (Fight Club, 2001).

Fight Club, by Chuck Palahniuk presents the body as an important site at which resistance are both registered. The text portrays issues of the masculine identity in a capitalist consumer society, depicts destruction as the core of power and resistance, and connects this with the understanding of the body.

References


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