

Of Fools and Knaves: Rhetorical and Ethical Implications of Interpretations of *Fight Club* from the Left and Right.

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In a discussion that centers on the relationship between ethics and ideology, Jacques Lacan briefly outlines the opposition between the “fool” or left-wing intellectual and the “knave” or right-wing intellectual (*Ethics* 182-183). For Lacan, the left-wing intellectual is more or less an artless buffoon whose “truths” are “not simply tolerated but adopted” by many in the broader community (*Ethics* 182). In contrast, the right-wing intellectual is compared to Stendhal’s “unmitigated scoundrel”: one who appeals with the rhetoric of pragmatism but who, “when required, ... admits he’s a crook” (*Ethics* 183). In *The Plague of Fantasies* Slavoj Žižek elaborates upon this opposition with reference to what he identifies to be modern incarnations of the Left and Right:

... the right-wing intellectual is a knave, a conformist who refers to the mere existence of a given order as an argument for it, and mocks the Left on account of its utopian plans, which necessarily lead to catastrophe; while the left-wing intellectual is a fool, a court jester who publicly displays the lie of the existing order, but in a way which suspends the performative efficiency of his speech. Today, after the fall of Socialism, the knave is the neoconservative advocate of the free market who cruelly rejects all forms of social solidarity as counterproductive sentimentalism, while the fool is a deconstructionist cultural critic who, by means of his ludic procedures destined to ‘subvert’ the existing order, actually serves as its supplement. (45-46)

While it is possible to dismiss the fool-knave oppositional paradigm as a trivializing caricature of ideological identity and action, benefit lies in considering it an index of important (aporetic) truths. In the first instance, the derisive association of liberals with fools and conservatives with knaves exhibits a degree of frustration and dissatisfaction towards the efficacy of both liberal and conservative incarnations of “politics as usual.” Needless to say this frustration is enduringly widespread. Moreover, the fool-knave paradigm illustrates the ease with which the ideological horizon can be so readily reduced to a dyadic rivalry; indeed, it reflects the prevalence in the popular imagination of conceiving political and ideological identity and action in terms of such a binary opposition. Subsequently, the fool-knave paradigm can serve as a useful starting point from which to demonstrate the utility and applicability of the fundamental precepts of Lacanian psychoanalytic ethics to rhetorical analyses. Indeed, Žižek’s assertion that psychoanalysis can

help to break the “vicious cycle of the fool-knave” by exposing its “underlying libidinal economy,” is one that reflects an important reality about how foundational beliefs and symbols associated with particular ideological positions are structured in relation to dominant and dominating discourses (*Plague* 46).

Drawing from Lacanian and post-Lacanian theories, the present study will not only assess the validity of the fool-knave paradigm in relation to critical and popular responses to the cinematic (dir. David Fincher) and literary (Chuck Palahniuk) versions of *Fight Club*, but also establish the expediency of psychoanalytic ethics as a supplement to the methodology of rhetorical analysis. One important project of rhetorical analysis is to address complex ethical, ideological, and aesthetic questions conveyed by representations of images, ideas, events, and identities. The present paper asserts that Lacanian psychoanalysis can be used to supplement the project of rhetorical analysis by providing a deeper understanding of such questions. In more specific terms, it will be demonstrated that the divergent ways in which particular phenomena – or texts – are interpreted, can be examined in terms of the fool-knave paradigm and other Lacanian nosological heuristics to ascertain the implicit ethical coordinates of those interpretations; namely, precisely how each interpretation is determined by its relationship to power.

The Impact of *Fight Club*: Reactions from the Left and Right

The present study engages in analyses of reactions to both the cinematic and literary versions of *Fight Club* qua the fool-knave paradigm because the remarkable popularity¹ of both texts continues to generate a preponderance of interpretations from scholarly and amateur critics of a wide range of political affiliations. It is also significant that most interpretations of either version engage with or respond to the subversive dimension of the text in question. Briefly, the subversive aspect of *Fight Club* involves not only the celebration of anti-capitalist domestic terrorism but also the irreverence with which religious symbols and tropes are appropriated. The story features an unnamed protagonist² – a hitherto conformist and corporate drone – who undergoes a psychotic split as a result of being disaffected by the false promise of the American Dream. His charismatic, nihilistic, and rebellious other half – Tyler Durden – institutes “fight club”; a weekly gathering where other bourgeois men disillusioned with the pointlessness of

their materialistic lives come to brutalize each other in order to achieve a sense of cathartic release. The fight club idea evolves into “Project Mayhem”: an anarchistic terrorist army that resembles a religious cult. Led by Durden, this group targets recognizable symbols of capitalism.

With reference to the stated goal of assessing the validity of the fool-knave opposition as an index of the ethical and rhetorical character of prevalent ideological positionalities, our object of analysis will be precisely the ways in which the subversive aspect of each version of *Fight Club* is rhetorically framed and ideologically negotiated by critics from the Left and Right.

A relatively common construal of both literary and cinematic renderings of *Fight Club* is that it constitutes a parable of Christian suffering and redemption. One variant of reading *Fight Club* within a religious context is seen in “The Use Value of *Fight Club* in Teaching Theories of Religion” by William Smith. Smith begins his short essay with the following claim about the Fincher-directed film:

Fight Club (1999) is a religious film; or at least that was my contention [to my students] when I taught the course Religion and Culture during the fall 2007 semester. (87)

While Smith does not actually elaborate on *why* Fincher’s film constitutes a religious text, Smith discusses how, drawing from Daniel Pals’ *Eight Theories of Religion*, he employs theoretical frameworks from Sigmund Freud, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber to ultimately locate for students “the presence of the religious in texts that do not center on any particular or overt religious tradition” (90).

With perhaps more convincing rhetoric and theological evidence, notable British scholar of contemporary religious symbolism Christopher Deacy posits of Fincher’s film that:

... the manner in which the anonymous protagonist (played by Edward Norton) endeavours to conquer his estranged and alienated condition is imbued with overt religious connotations. Upon coming into contact with the world of fight clubs, the protagonist no longer identifies himself as a slave to materialism ... Apprehending that “things you own end up owning you”, the physical nature of the fight club experience engenders a spiritual rebirth of not inconsiderable magnitude. (63)

Deacy goes on to identify various instances in Palahniuk's novel and Fincher's film in which the "notion of redemption through suffering" and "Christian vocabulary" occur (63). He also parallels depictions of the unnamed protagonist and the "nihilistic" Tyler Durden character with accounts of the life of Jesus Christ, identifies the "ecclesiastical dimension of the film" (64), and explicates the "sacramental quality" of the brutal fight club bouts (65). Deacy even argues that "notwithstanding the nihilistic ingredients that imbue the film [and novel], such as Tyler's claims that 'Without pain, without sacrifice, you have nothing' and that 'I don't want to die without any scars', *Fight Club* could ultimately be interpreted as a film about the rejection of nihilism" (65). For Deacy, it is precisely this "rejection of nihilism" that renders the story Christian.

On websites such as "Christian Spotlight on the Movies"³ and hollywoodjesus.com, a great majority of amateur reviewers coincide with Deacy's reading of Fincher's film as a Christian parable. However, amongst these arguably less-studied critics, there appears to be two conflicting understandings with regards to the meaningfulness of Durden's character and the fight club phenomenon. For example, David Smith from hollywoodjesus.com contends that:

I believe that the [*sic*] "Fight Club" is a metaphor for sin ... Also, the alter-ego type [*sic*] character Tyler Dirden [*sic*] (played by Brad Pitt) also represents every person's "Old Person" (Romans 6:6, Ephesians 4:22, Colossians 3:9) and/or sinful nature along with temptation and the influence of Satan, or "The Devil," in our mind [*sic*] and lives.⁴

In contrast, another commentator on the same website reads Durden's character as a "Messiah/Christ" figure and likens the violence of the fight clubs to "the violence of the Holy Spirit on our flesh [that] restores our humanity and makes us new people as God intended us to be."⁵ In order to make sense of these seemingly disparate reactions to the film, it is firstly important to consider what they have in common.

Notwithstanding the differences in rhetorical context, interpretative acuity, and intended audience, Deacy's, William Smith's, and the Christian bloggers' respective interpretations of *Fight Club* reflect the same intent or argument. Namely, in each case, an unambiguous desire to codify *Fight Club* as a religious parable is conveyed by authors of the above-mentioned

interpretations. William Smith concedes of his incorporation of the Fincher film in his “Religion and Culture” course that:

If it is not immediately evident how this violent, anarchistic, and anti-capitalist movie is religious or fits into an introductory course on religion, then one of my goals in teaching this film ... has already been exposed – drawing the student’s eye from the obviously religious to the less so. But getting to the place in which the film reads religiously to a student is a bit tricky and requires a certain developmental arc. (87)

Similarly, Deacy clearly articulates his intention of demonstrating the way in which *Fight Club* amounts to a “potent” religious parable in the introduction of his article (61). Further, in his short bio positioned at the end of his article, Deacy describes that his current work “examines the extent in which the medium of film can raise vital questions about the location and relevance of religious values in the contemporary cultural landscape” (72). Regarding the third group discussed above, precisely insofar as the rhetorical context of blogs render contributions to be framed as both debate and discussion, the reviews posted by the Christian bloggers axiomatically signal a desire to persuade or argue. Moreover, regardless of whether Durden is construed to be “heavenly” or “evil,” all the above-cited reviews present the idea of *Fight Club* being a Christian parable as self-evident. From a psychoanalytic perspective, what is most notable about the structural similarity between Deacy’s, Smith’s, and the Christian blogger texts is what is elided in their respective interpretations.

In the first instance, while it is certainly the case that, as Deacy argues, one of the underlying themes of *Fight Club* is the alienation and malaise of contemporary western society (72), this theme is not necessarily and only a Christian preoccupation. Indeed, if *Fight Club* constitutes a parable of Christian suffering based upon such criteria, then it would be just as valid to claim that any text with such a theme, from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* to Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, are essentially Christian parables. Secondly, aside from Christian references, *Fight Club* features many references to Buddhism.⁶ Thirdly and most significantly, while it is undeniable that Christian references can be discerned in both the cinematic and literary versions of *Fight Club*, these references are *always* framed within a context of ironic irreverence and/or nihilism. William Smith’s own concession that he

encountered great difficulty in convincing his students that Fincher's film constitutes a religious text evidences how overdetermined such a reading is. Indeed, a few salient examples of the *sacrilegious* treatment of Christian imagery in the film's script and the novel include: the way in which the wild cheering on of bloodied combatants by the fight club audience of each bout is ironically compared by the protagonist to "hysterical shouting ... in tongues ... at a Pentecostal church"; the instance whereby Durden identifies himself as one of "God's unwanted children"; and, in perhaps the most blasphemous moment of *Fight Club*, when the protagonist travesties the well-known Christian dictum when he mockingly mutters, "In Tyler We Trust."⁷ This pervasive sense of irreverence, which can be understood to be just one of the elements of subversion in both versions of *Fight Club*, ultimately problematizes any endeavor to read either text as a Christian parable. Curiously, however, not only is *Fight Club* construed to be a religious allegory by the above-cited commentators, but in each of their interpretations, an intense *enjoyment* of the film is averred. In structural terms, this is significant insofar as it suggests a certain homology about the way in which *jouissance* is negotiated for these commentators. In other words, what this means is that the unambiguous purpose of the reviews, coupled with their apparent denial or omission of the transgressive blasphemous dimension of *Fight Club*, suggests a distinctive discursive orientation with regards to power.

To return to the Lacanian fool-knave formulation, it can be argued that these interpretations of *Fight Club* reflect an essentially "conservative" disposition. This is, of course, not to claim that all facets of Christianity are conservative as such, but rather that – at least within this formulation – any reading of *Fight Club* as a specifically Christian parable is. Žižek argues that *jouissance* for the conservative knave "pertains to the subject's pain" insofar as a "concrete complaint [becomes an] abstract acceptance of the enigma of Fate" (*Plague* 46-48). With regards to the above-cited interpretations, the film is compelling for the authors not in spite of its subversive blasphemy, but precisely *because* of it. The blasphemous content of *Fight Club*, then, is the truth that must be *disavowed* in each interpretation so that its meaningfulness can be (re)configured according to each reviewer's personal paradigm of Christian doctrine. For William Smith, not only are his students enjoined to ignore "anarchistic" and sacrilegious elements of the film in order to apprehend *Fight Club* as a religious text, ideas from Marxist and psychoanalytic theories are selectively used to generate a Christian message. Indicating how contrived and belabored the

task is of convincing students of the religiosity of Fincher's film, Smith admits: "There is a certain intended redundancy between the lectures and the readings, which attempts to direct the students' attention to how the most essential elements of the reading relate [to the argument that *Fight Club* is a religious film]" (88). In Deacy's case, the violent anti-capitalist hijinks of Project Mayhem become rearticulated as a Christian struggle for salvation in the face of decadent secularism. Similarly, the two contradictory interpretations of Durden by the Christian bloggers as Savior and Satan ultimately arrive at the same conclusion because each involve the process whereby a "concrete complaint" (the material conditions that give rise to the film's vision of societal dystopia) is recast as an abstract acceptance of Fate (these are the lamentable, but inevitable, trials and tribulations of what it is to be a Christian today).

Via Lacanian nosology, this disavowal must be properly understood as fetishistic in nature: just as the fetish object is that feature by which the very place of the subject's castration is marked, the silently disavowed blasphemy that stains the cinematic and literary text constitutes the surplus enjoyment or paradoxical "pleasure in pain" that sets desire in motion for these reviewers. In this instance, the conservative knave's subjection to the Discourse of the Master is thus borne out in the following way: Christian doctrine emerges as the Master signifier for these reviewers inasmuch as it simultaneously structures their experience of the "reality" of the text in question (each reviewer is afforded his/her own interpretation of *Fight Club* as long as that interpretation is compatible with fundamental Christian tenets), whilst masking the division of the subject because the surplus – incarnated as *objet petit a* – of the signifying operation is disavowed (in this case, the blasphemous dimension of *Fight Club*).

In contrast to the putatively "conservative" disavowal of the blasphemous dimension of *Fight Club*, the attention both versions have received from pundits commonly associated with the Left demonstrates a more direct engagement with either text's subversive aspect. In praise of *Fight Club*, art house film critic Amy Taubin celebrates Fincher's film as a transgressive text that "expresses some pretty subversive, right-on-the-zeitgeist ideas about masculinity and our name-brand, bottom-line society" (16). Similarly favorable is the evaluation provided by Terry Lee in "Virtual Violence in *Fight Club*: This Is What Transformation of Masculine Ego Feels Like." Lee argues that the film "enacts a masculine role model that we can embrace, a model that lets

men destroy harmful masculine gender roles” (419). A third laudatory account of *Fight Club* can be noted in English professor Alex Tuss’s essay where he argues that, “*Fight Club*’s anonymous narrator and Tyler Durden, his alter ego, constitute critiques of ... conventional male models and their striving for success in America” (93).

A conventional rhetorical analysis might identify of these laudatory interpretations of *Fight Club* from the Left the bandwagon argument made by Taubin to her audience of *Fight Club* fans who subscribe to the popular film magazine her article is published in; or the hasty generalization made by Tuss and Lee about masculine identity in America. A psychoanalytic reading might add that such “revolutionary” sentiments, as expressed by critics such as Taubin, Lee, and Tuss, ultimately fail to coincide with the material and contextual *truth* of *Fight Club* as a product of mainstream corporate media industries. Moreover, as is the case with detractors of *Fight Club* from the Left, Taubin, Lee, and Tuss speak from a position that is sanctioned by the very same mainstream that they repudiate.

While disparaging interpretations of *Fight Club* from the Left vary in terms of specific ideological positioning as well as extent of disapproval, most seem to focus upon some way in which either version of *Fight Club* fails in its own critique of modern American culture and/or identity. For example, Stacy Thompson, in her article “Punk Cinema,” argues that the conclusion of Fincher’s film “radically forecloses the anarchist, social, and punk possibilities that its ideological positioning has forced open” (57). In comparison, in his essay “Liberalism and the Challenge of *Fight Club*,” Christopher Duncan suggests that although Fincher’s film demonstrates how the “bourgeoisification” of American culture has failed to engender “the happiness of liberalism,” neither is it able to provide any meaningful solutions (137). In their neo-Marxian reading of Fincher’s film and Palahniuk’s novel, Bülent Diken and Carsten Lausten note that although *Fight Club* constitutes a kind of “Marxism for dummies” (367), it is ultimately “not subversive but supportive of capitalist desire” (363).

One particularly scathing account of the film can be observed in the *New Art Examiner* article “IKEA Boy and the Politics of Male Bonding: *Fight Club*, Consumerism, and Violence” by Henry Giroux and Imre Szeman. Here, *Fight Club* is denounced for its misogyny and

heterosexism that culminate in “a highly stereotypical and limited sense of masculinity that is seen as wedded to the immediacy of pleasure sustained through violence and abuse” (61).

Giroux and Szeman further contend that the anti-capitalist anarchism featured in Fincher’s film ultimately fails to offer any real solutions to the “commodification and alienation of contemporary society” because it “largely ignores the real” (60). They lament that:

... *Fight Club* is ... dangerously seductive because it seems that its proto-fascist cells at least offer a possible vision of a collective oppositional or even revolutionary response to the crisis of the neoliberal order ... But even here, in its perverse imagination of an anti-consumerist skinhead army, *Fight Club* simply reinforces our sense of defeat in the face of contemporary capitalism by making a regressive, vicious, and obscene politics seem like the only possible alternative. (60)

As champions of political correctness, Giroux and Szeman maintain that a “real” solution to the problems of global capitalism and the so-called “neoliberal order”⁸ can be achieved through debate, dialogue, and good old-fashioned resistance in the form of union halls and democratic social movements and clubs (60).

It is easy to discern, in the reading of *Fight Club* that Giroux and Szeman provide, a sense of triumph at having successfully exposed the politically incorrect nature of the film. However, in spite of their deconstructive rigor, a number of problems can be detected in the claims they make. To revisit the Lacanian opposition between the fool and the knave, Žižek elucidates that the impotence of the fool’s pronouncements is a function of the gap that exists between the *enunciated content* and the *position of enunciation* so that “what, on the level of the enunciated content, is the critical rejection of an ideological hegemony can well involve the full endorsement of this same hegemony on the level of the position of enunciation” (*Plague* 83, n.2). What Žižek is trying to argue here is that what often compromises the cogency of the left-wing critique is its dependence upon the aegis of that which it criticizes. In this instance, the position articulated in Giroux and Szeman’s essay – as well as the above-cited laudatory and unfavorable evaluations from the Left – can be related to Lacan’s nosological structure of hysteria because its relation to the Discourse of the Master – one of failed interpellation – can be expressed in terms of the following question addressed to the (big) Other: “Why am I that which you have designated me?”⁹ This question denotes the trauma experienced as a result of the hysteric’s

subject position and can be linked to the self-satisfied “enjoyment” in Giroux and Szeman’s disparaging critique of *Fight Club*. This gesture of resistance is thus qualified because the place from which it issues continues to be determined by, and subject to, the signifying network of the dominant discourse that is opposed. In other words (and as noted above), the authority upon which the pronouncements made by the Left-wing critic rests is accorded by the very same “neoliberal order” that is being condemned. Therefore to use Lacan’s provocative terminology: the “truths” presented by the left-wing fool ultimately serve to sustain the position of the Master because the fool’s subjection to the terms of the dominant discourse allows the otherwise inassimilable excess generated by the signifying process to be re-codified in a way that poses little threat to the *status quo*.¹⁰

In order to more clearly understand why the position taken by Giroux and Szeman lacks potency, a second limitation inherent to their reading of Fincher’s film needs to be considered. This limitation can be located in the fundamental misrecognition upon which the ideological polemic of their reading is based. In their call for a society whose members resist capitalism through debate, dialogue, and democratic mobilization, what Giroux and Szeman fail to recognize is that this idealized condition of egalitarian democracy is, in its basic content, already inherent to the material conditions of the society they revile. In *For They Know Not What They Do* Žižek postulates of the utopic enterprise via his Hegelian reading of the French Revolution that:

... utopias are “utopian” not because they depict an “impossible Ideal”, a dream not for this world, but they misrecognize the way their ideal state *is already realized* in its basic content ... [W]hat the Jacobins overlooked is the fact that the ideal after which they strove was, in its notional structure, *already realized* in the “dirty” acquisitive activity which appeared to them as the betrayal of their high ideals. Vulgar, egoistic bourgeois everyday life is the actuality of freedom, equality and brotherhood: freedom of free trade, formal equality in the eyes of the law, and so on ... (184-185, emphasis in original).

If we agree with Žižek’s reasoning, then it appears that, in their idealization of democratic possibility, it is in fact Giroux and Szeman who have “ignored the real.” Moreover, we have only to recall Hegel’s lesson in *Phenomenology of Spirit* about the “Topsy Turvy World” and the invertedness of inversion (or how inversion is always double) to see that far from advocating skinhead fascism as the only alternative to the hyper-capitalism of our times, *Fight Club* caricatures the left-wing project in order to demonstrate how human folly can so easily pervert

the highest ideals.¹¹ Indeed, it should not be overlooked that, in both versions of *Fight Club*, the narrator-protagonist – with whom we are meant to identify – ultimately rejects Durden, his terrorist machinations, and his vision of a new world order.

A third variety of academic essay that can be assessed in relation to the fool-knave paradigm is the study that is neither laudatory nor reproachful of *Fight Club*. One such essay is Renee Lockwood's "Cults, Consumerism, and the Construction of Self: Exploring the Religious within *Fight Club*," in which the author "explores the manner in which the creation of new religious movements is depicted in the *Fight Club* narrative" (321). Unlike arguments respectively made by Deacy and William Smith, who ascribe the status of "religious parable" to *Fight Club*, Lockwood argues that "the narrative fits perfectly with the psychopathology model of cult recruitment as recapitulated by Stark and Bainbridge" (321). The key structural difference between Lockwood's thesis and the contentions made by Deacy and William Smith is that Lockwood examines religious elements of *Fight Club* in relation to the socio-cultural or psychopathological implications of those elements, while Deacy and Smith see *Fight Club* as a text that conveys a religious message. It is therefore precisely this difference that allows Lockwood to avoid engendering a "knaveish" account of the text. Lockwood's analysis also can be differentiated against the above-cited accounts of *Fight Club* from the Left because care is taken by Lockwood to neither celebrate nor disparage the textual "intent" of either version of *Fight Club*. Rather, Lockwood methodically reviews specific capacities in which both Palahniuk's novel and Fincher's film fulfill the Stark and Bainbridge criteria. For example, Lockwood demonstrates the way in which the key theme of "emasculatation crisis" resulting from consumerism in *Fight Club* accurately reflects the Stark and Bainbridge criterion that cults form in part as a result of personal and societal crises (323). She also correlates the portrayal of the protagonist's dissociative identity disorder in *Fight Club* with the Stark and Bainbridge postulation that cults are often headed by charismatic figures who suffer from mental illness (Lockwood 325-326). These and other elements of Lockwood's study serve to explore how rhetorical tropes in both versions of *Fight Club* can ultimately be used to more clearly understand "the potential religious crises facing the consumerist West" (321). Indeed, in her conclusion, Lockwood intimates that the value of her study lies in its ability to generate possible solutions to the threat posed by future fundamentalist cults:

While new religious movements are still emerging in contemporary Western society, ... [her analyses of *Fight Club*] present a preview of potential social concerns and fundamentalist perspectives that may arise in the form of yet unseen movements in the future. Thus the detailed exploration of cults, consumerism, and the construction of self within the *Fight Club* narrative make it an invaluable commentary on religion and modernity. (332)

In rhetorical analysis, it is commonly held that interpretations tend to reveal more about the interpreter rather than the object of interpretation. In contrast to the Leftist readings of *Fight Club* that belie a desire to circumscribe the textual intent of the object of analysis, Lockwood more cleanly reveals her own objective as to substantiate the utility of the Stark and Bainbridge model for understanding and possibly redressing the “religious crises facing the consumer West” (321). Here, however, although Lockwood does not avow a “revolutionary” subject position against the discursive aegis under which she espouses her claims, as an institutionalized academic her “position of enunciation” is yet sanctioned by a Master discourse; in this case what Lacan refers to as the Discourse of the University.¹² Therefore, in terms of Lacan’s Fool-Knave heuristic, the political efficacy of Lockwood’s espousals is ultimately tethered to a position deferential to the Master discourse. As Evans explains of the discourse of the university, precisely because the dominant position of enunciation is occupied by Knowledge, “... behind all attempts to impart an apparently ‘neutral’ knowledge to the other can always be located an attempt at mastery (mastery of knowledge, and domination of the other to whom this knowledge is imparted) (46).

In “For a Leftist Appropriation of the European Legacy,” Žižek asks: “Are we then condemned to the debilitating alternative of choosing between a knave or a fool, or is there a *tertium datur*?” (73). According to Žižek, this “third way” involves a kind of “politics proper” in which “a particular demand is not simply part of the negotiation of interests, but aims at something more, i.e. starts to function as the metaphoric condensation of the global restructuring of the entire social space” (74). Subsequently, because Žižek’s *tertium datur* necessarily involves a gesture that disturbs or transgresses the order of things, any interpretation of *Fight Club* from an “institutional” perspective – including this one – cannot meet this criterion of “politics proper.”

This elusive “third way,” however, can be apprehended in Palahniuk’s text itself: in its specific difference from Fincher’s cinematic version.

In her analysis of the divergent conclusions of the cinematic and literary versions of *Fight Club*, Kirster Friday argues that Fincher’s film betrays the “Lacanian logic” of the novel in which “the construction of both personal and historical identity is an interminable process in a perpetual state of deferral or impossibility” (21). Indeed, Fincher’s film does seem to end rather too neatly: the protagonist and his Durden persona are locked in a final confrontation in which the former ends up shooting himself in the mouth. The protagonist survives this wound while his Durden dimension is effaced by it. The former is then reunited with Marla and they join hands as skyscrapers housing credit card companies are devastated across the cityscape horizon in a spectacular finale. While there exists a certain degree of undecidability about this ending – with the destruction of all the financial buildings in the city, will the slate indeed be wiped clean? – its subversive impact is limited because the focus of the cinematic gaze has shifted from the protagonist’s disidentification with Society to the prospect of his renewed romance with Marla. Palahniuk’s novel, in contrast, features a much more ambivalent conclusion which sees Durden withdraw as a function of Marla’s arrival. The protagonist shoots himself anyway but it appears that he survives this attempt at suicide and is subsequently installed in a mental institution. Here, he no longer appears agitated and restless but there exists a sense that Tyler Durden will return to wreak more havoc upon the world. Friday sees in this deferral a transgressive promise whereby the “impossibility” of civilization’s demise is transformed into possibility (22).

While Friday’s case is a persuasive one, I would like to argue that the subversive gesture contained in the ending of Palahniuk’s novel is in fact much more immediate. With regards to the ethical implications of the text, what is important in the present reading of *Fight Club* is not whether or not the protagonist biologically dies as a result of his attempted suicide; rather, what is at stake is that the protagonist’s suicide succeeds in effecting the protagonist’s death in Symbolical terms. When he declares at the outset of the final chapter, “Of course, when I pulled the trigger, I died,” this death must be understood as the culmination of the trajectory of subjective destitution. This is precisely why Joan Copjec in her account of the Lacanian ethical act maintains that:

... what is at issue in the intersection of freedom and death is not biological death, but the death drive. It is to the latter that we owe the possibility of an ethical act that does not alienate freedom or incur additional guilt. (19)

The protagonist's suicide, then, breaks the deadlock between the left-wing fool and the conservative knave and eludes the dominating grasp of the Master-Signifier. Firstly, his Symbolical demise can be understood as the apex of the process of subjective destitution. In *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, Žižek refines this point:

... it is the 'subjective destitution', the subject's complete self-externalization, that makes the Master superfluous: a Master is a Master only in so far as I, his subject, am not completely externalized; only in so far as I contain somewhere deep in myself *agalma*, the secret treasure that accounts for the unique character of my personality – a Master becomes a Master by recognizing me in my uniqueness. (172)

In the epilogue of Palahniuk's novel, the protagonist is, in psychoanalytic terms, at the "end" of analysis because through his complete externalization, he has irrevocably renounced the ineffable precious kernel that makes him a unique being. Indeed, in the concluding exchange between the protagonist and "God," the latter is portrayed as a bureaucrat that no longer is able to exert a hold upon the former:

I've met God across his long walnut desk with his diplomas hanging on the wall behind him, and God asks me, "Why?"
Why did I cause so much pain?
Didn't I realize that each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of special unique specialness?
Can't I see how we're all manifestations of love?
I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God's got this all wrong.
We are not special.
We are not crap or trash, either.
We just are....
And God says, "No that's not right."
Yeah. Well. Whatever. You can't teach God anything. (Palahniuk 207)

This final exchange reveals the truly radical aspect of the protagonist's evolution from the subject supposed to know to a subject who *knows*. This knowledge that the protagonist acquires is of the order of the Real because it consists in the realization that the Master (whether he is Durden, God, or some idiotic bureaucratic behind a large walnut desk) is entirely superfluous.

Obviously, neither the Left nor Right can simply be reduced to the handful of *Fight Club* reviews examined in the present study. Moreover, there continues to exist the prospect that the fool-knave opposition might, in certain applications, yield generalizations more so than substantive clarification. Nevertheless, what is clear is the expediency of this paradigm as a heuristical starting point from which the ethical aporias inherent to specific ideologically oriented formulations and phenomena/texts can be identified and engaged. What also becomes apparent is that there are no easy ethical solutions to the interpretative process because of the persistence of the specter of ideological/hegemonic desire. Lacanian psychoanalysis, however, does provide conventional rhetorical analysis with the means of laying bare the ideological coordinates implicit in any representational or interpretative discursive gesture.

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¹ Palahniuk's novel continues to enjoy much more critical attention than any of his other works. Moreover, it won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award for 1997 (<http://www.pnba.org/awards.htm>) as well as the Oregon Book Award for Best Novel in the same year (http://www.literary-arts.org/awards/past_fiction.php). Fincher's adaptation generates significantly more commercial success as well as critical engagement. And although the film's highest all time ranking listed on [boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com) is 777th in 2002, DVD sales of the film continue to rank in the top 100. For example, in November 2009, after 494 weeks in release, *Fight Club* was still the 22nd most purchased film worldwide selling just under 50 000 copies a week (www.the-numbers.com). Also, [Filmcrave.com](http://www.filmcrave.com) lists Fincher's *Fight Club* as the third most popular film of all time behind *The Godfather* and *The Shawshank Redemption*.

² A few readings of both versions of *Fight Club* erroneously list the protagonist's name as either "Jack" (film) or "Joe" (novel). In both versions, the protagonist is necessarily unnamed because he represents the contemporary American "Everyman." The confusion arises when he makes references such as "I am Jack's Raging Bile Duct" (Ulhs n.p.) and "I am Joe's Blood-Boiling Rang" (Palahniuk 96). These references come from a popular *Reader's Digest* column where bodily organs are personified and describe their functions in the first person.

³ <http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/pre2000/fightclub.html>

⁴ David Smith – http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/fight_club_02.htm

⁵ Glenn Jordan – http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/fight_club_01.htm

⁶ See Renee Lockwood's "Cults, Consumerism, and the Construction of Self" for a detailed exploration of Buddhist tropes in *Fight Club*.

⁷ While similar examples can be found in Palahniuk's text, the ones mentioned here come from Jim Uhls' screenplay obtainable online at http://www.hundland.com/scripts/Fight-Club_third.htm. This is primarily because the three cited interpretations of *Fight Club* as a Christian parable examine only the film.

⁸ Giroux and Szeman specify "neoliberalism" to be "a political, economic, and cultural formation which construes profit making as the essence of democracy and provides a rationale for a handful of private interests to control as much of social life as possible in order to maximize their personal profit" (32).

⁹ While the way in which *jouissance* is structured in Giroux and Szeman's essay allow us to read it in terms of the Hysteric's Discourse, it should be noted that the left-wing intellectual may also be understood in terms of the Discourse of the University where power/"the Master" is masked by the mantle of "objective knowledge." See Lacan's *Le Séminaire. Livre XVII. L'envers de la psychanalyse* for an elaboration of the Four Discourses.

¹⁰ Moreover, as Lacan observes of the dialectical continuity between the left-wing fool and the right-wing knave, "the result of gathering crooks into a herd" leads inevitably to a "collective foolery ... [and] by a curious chiasma, the 'foolery' which constitutes the individual style of the left-wing intellectual gives rise to a collective 'knavery'" (*Ethics* 183).

¹¹ For an elaboration of this, see for example Žižek's reading of the parodic inversions inherent to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in *For They Know Not What They Do* (10-11).

¹² See for example Dylan Evans' account of the Four Discourses in *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (44-46).