

The Illusion of Freedom: Escaping Ideology to Mistakenly Fall Into A New One In *Fight Club* 1999

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ABSTRACT: The focus of this research is in the area of Marxist literary criticism. Such a study is important in order to acknowledge and analyze the fixed ideologies that one may encounter living in a world framed by capitalism and consumerism. The research adapted in this paper includes critical analysis of the movie *Fight Club* 1999 directed by David Fincher, in addition to critical investigation, and inspection of the different Ideologies and characters showcased in the capitalist world of *Fight Club*. The film portrays the relationship between the main characters, the Narrator and Tyler Durden, and their attempt at an escape from Ideology characterized by Capitalism and Consumerism to an Ideology that is governed by what is supposed to be absolute freedom. The main conclusion drawn from this research is that *Fight Club* might present characters' experience of nearly escaping one Ideology to fall into not freedom but rather an illusion of freedom.

KEYWORDS: *Fight Club*, Ideology, capitalism, illusion of freedom, consumerism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Philosophers and thinkers have strongly argued and tried to prove throughout the years that people are governed by what is called ideology. Of course, the term ideology can never be easily defined, for it can hold different interpretations. According to Marxism, ideology is “what causes us to misrepresent the world to ourselves... but, more importantly, that which makes us experience our life in a certain way and makes us believe that that way of seeing ourselves and the world is natural” (Bertens 71, 72). Thus, ideology camera obscures the reality. In so doing, people are governed by false representations of reality. Ideology is concealed under different forms and shapes of reality, it can be under the hidden façade of religion, or class distinctions and struggles, making the human consciousness unconsciously agrees to perceptions of ideology of which take the forms of working class and bourgeoisie values. Hence, those people are “unwitting carriers of ‘false consciousness’¹.” (Leitch, 2001, as cited in Hamadi 2017) From this notion, this paper showcases an analysis of *Fight Club* 1999 (the movie) using Marxist concepts and theories of ideologies and social systems, and how one can seek freedom, yet his/ her journey might end up in only falling into a new and different frame of ideology. Thus, *Fight Club* might showcase a human’s experience of a nearly successful try of jumping into freedom of limitation. However, it concludes to be a human’s experience of an illusion of freedom.

II. DILEMMA OF THE HUMAN BEING

Fight Club is a dark and thought-provoking movie that explores themes of masculinity, consumerism, and identity through the story of an unnamed narrator who becomes entangled in the violent and anarchic world of underground fight clubs. The film’s protagonist, played by Edward Norton, is trapped in a life of consumerism and corporate drudgery. He appears in the first scene as a person with no sense of identity, no voice, and the audience only hears his thoughts as he utters “everything [in this consumerist world] is a copy of a copy of a copy.” (Fincher, 1999, :00:03:47) Living in a world that functions under a capitalist ideology, the protagonist, who’s the narrator, is a victim of false consciousness. Karl Marx argues that ideology is functioning unknowingly by consent, and “it is the nature of ideology to conceal the reality of class struggle from our perception and consciousness; and insofar. as working-class people unconsciously absorb bourgeois values, they are unwitting carriers of ‘false consciousness’¹.” (Leitch, 2001, as cited in Hamadi 2017) Further, throughout the movie, the audience witnesses the start of rebellion in the main character when he decides to escape his reality and the beginning of rejecting his current ideology. At first, the narrator did not know how to exit the consumerist system

¹ For further reading on ‘False Consciousness’: Leitch, Vincent B. (Ed.). (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company.

he lived in, or even how to create a system that fits him. Until the moment where the narrator meets a charismatic and mysterious man who introduces him to a secret society of men who gather to fight each other as a way of rebelling against society, of which this is the turning point in the narrator's life. Hence, the audience starts to clearly see the internal dilemma of the alienated, suffering, and living in an existential crisis Narrator.

In *Fight Club*, the narrator makes several comments about the illusion of safety and the false sense of security that many people have in their lives. The illusion of safety is represented through the character of the protagonist's boss, who constantly reassures him that his job is safe and that he is a valued employee. This creates a sense of stability and predictability in the protagonist's life, but ultimately proves to be false, as he is eventually fired. Tyler Durden says in one of the scenes that clearly explains the illusion of safety that people are internalizing and living in a capitalist Ideology:

We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War's a spiritual war... our Great Depression is our lives. We've 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. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off. (Fincher, 1999, 1:09:30)

Throughout the story, the Narrator and Tyler Durden seek to undermine the status quo and to challenge the societal norms that have created this illusion of safety. They believe that by embracing the chaos and violence of the fight club, they can tap into something primal and authentic that has been lost in modern society, hence, the start of the fight club journey. In *Welcome to The Desert of The Real*, Slavoj Zizek argues that after September 11 the US is forced to strike back! Yet, "the war on terrorism thus functions as an act to whose true aim is to lull us into secure conviction that nothing has really changed." (44) From that notion, the illusion of safety in the film is a symptom of the underlying contradictions of capitalist society, which creates a sense of false security while also perpetuating inequality and injustice. The film suggests that true safety and security can only be achieved through a radical critique of the underlying structures of capitalist society, rather than through individual acts of rebellion or violence.

III. THE 'FIGHT CLUB' IDEOLOGY

If one interprets Ideology as a frame that is set and defined by certain unseen rules, and people must function within that frame, then the main frame of this new, yet secretive, created ideology is the use of violence to express and be free. The audience can notice that the 'fight club' ideology is about fight, feel the pain, let blood flow, and the more you get hurt the more you feel free. Thus, people that function within that ideology meet the truth of the reality, of course not to mention that these fights happen by consent. Therefore, when the owner came to shut down the fight club, it is like shutting down their new established system that evokes freedom to them. Consequently, the owner, a lousy exploitative character, was treated by hostile and met with violent reactions. In *The Desert of The Real*, Zizek sheds the light on how violence drives to the result of the reality. He argues that to shake the system and its ideology and revolt against it, bomb that ideology to change its concepts and notions. Zizek writes:

This is the element of truth in Karl Heinz Stockhausen's provocative statement that the planes hitting the WTC towers was the ultimate work of art: we can perceive the collapse of the WTC towers as the climatic conclusion of the twentieth-century art's 'passion for the real' – the 'terrorist' themselves did not do it primarily to provoke real material damage, but for the spectacular effect of it. (13)

The fight club is not a utopian place or community where everyone is equal and respected, but rather a brutal and anarchic space where individuals compete for dominance and power. Yet, the Narrator and Tyler Durden managed to be the upper rulers of the fight club, which later turned against the Narrator and led him back to the point where he was in the corporate world! The Narrator's initial escape from that capitalist ideology where everything is just a mere copy of each other, to his new world, and his new ideology is established by these fights. He has a sense of understanding that the outcome of these fights equals freedom. In one of the scenes the Narrator utters:

After fighting, everything else in your life got the volume turned down. You could deal with anything. The idea was that if you could wake up in the morning and face yourself in the mirror, you could handle anything. Cut your hair, trim your nails, it was all about the details. (Fincher, 1999, 00:38:38)

This quote might suggest that the Fight Club represents a kind of extreme form of masculinity, where resilience is valued, and how we after we lose everything, we become free. Yet, to cut their hair, trim their nails, thinking that this is part of reaching that hoped freedom, is merely ironic! The irony lies in the idea that a new system where the narrator became the upper ruler, and now has a huge number of followers, that function unknowingly under that ideology, manipulating their minds to simply believe that they are free and uncontrolled. This 'Fight Club' ideology ironically overlaps, and crashes towards the end, and the audience witnesses the Narrator repeating words, appearing without being noticed, being and living in his worst nightmare; alienated and invisible. Even though he criticizes people from the capitalist consumerist ideology for being a copy of copy, the Narrator ends up being in another copy, and creating another paralleled world where everything ironically functions under a

system which includes subjects that are copies of each other. Eventually, the main character himself is controlled by an upper power, the unseen figure of Tyler Durden, played by Brad Pitt.

IV. CONTRADICTIONS AND REGRETS

Contradictions are found in the scenes of the movie to create a sense of tension and complexity, challenging the viewer to question their own assumptions and beliefs about the world. Hence, the consciousness of the narrator, as well as the consciousness of the audience is provoked by showcasing two different and contradicting ideologies that question the human existence. Marx argues “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.” (Marx, n.d) The fight club is initially created as a way for men to express their repressed aggression and frustration through controlled violence, but it eventually becomes a destructive force that leads to chaos and anarchy. In the movie, the character Tyler Durden addresses the Narrator making sure that he acknowledges “You're not your job. 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.” (Fincher, 1999, 1:23:15) On the other hand, the viewers are bluntly witnessing through the movie the capitalist world, the one where Tyler Durden draws the image of when he says: “We're consumers. We are by-products of a lifestyle obsession. Murder, crime, poverty, these things don't concern me. What concerns me are celebrity magazines, television with 500 channels, some guy's name on my underwear.” (Fincher, 1999, 00:29:30) It is the world that is controlled by capitalism that functions by rules, set of frames and social statues, of which is considered the only acceptable ideology that communities can survive through, it is the world that the Narrator tries to escape. Further, contradictions in the movie suggest that there are no easy answers or solutions to the problems of consumer society, and it is clear to the viewers that any attempt at rebellion or resistance is troubled with contradictions and risks.

Zizek mentions in an interview that “ideology is not only the world we live in, but ... the wrong ways we imagine how to escape ... from reality, you produce the same world.” (VICE, 2013) Throughout the movie, viewers are observing the escape from one ideology to another. They also might notice the contradictions between the two ideologies. Moreover, viewers might witness the main character in several scenes regrets his escape: “I am Jack's wasted life.”- “I am Jack's broken heart.” (Fincher, 1999) At first, the Narrator is drawn to Durden's philosophy and the sense of purpose it gives him. However, as the story unfolds, he begins to realize the destructive and unsustainable nature of Tyler's beliefs and actions. By the end of the movie, the Narrator regrets his involvement with Tyler Durden and the fight club and works to undo the damage that has been done; “I let go. Lost in oblivion. Dark and silent and complete. I found freedom. Losing all hope was freedom.” (Fincher, 1999, 00:08:30) Eventually, the Narrator realizes that his involvement with Tyler Durden and the fight club has not brought him the fulfillment he was seeking and has instead left him feeling lost and hopeless.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the movie *Fight Club* portrays characters that choose to rebel against the dominant ideologies of consumerism and capitalism, but they also conform to a set of alternative values that are just as inflexible and limiting. It suggests that violence, destruction, and anarchy can provide freedom and give the characters a sense of liberation and empowerment in a world that is actually oppressive. The Narrator, who is the protagonist, tries to create a system that gives freedom, but ends up creating a more horrible world that he himself escapes again, of which shocks with contradictions. To some extent, viewers see the narrator as he goes back to his old ideology; an ideology the appreciates the consumerist and capitalist frames. Finally, The main character conforms and consents to his old ideology, and thinking that the old one fits him even more better, for the reason that there is no freedom but an illusion of freedom.

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