

25 Years Later, I Finally Understand Fight Club

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtbpbfNFp6k>

Hardly a month ago, a 20-year-old came within an inch of assassinating a former president of the United States.

The Young Turks: You know if the bullet goes an inch the other way and it might be something we've never seen before.

The incident rattled the world for about a week until it was eclipsed by the next plot twist in the ongoing reality TV spectacle that is US politics. The hawk tuah girl has held the public's attention longer.

Hawk tuah and spit on that thing, you get me?

It's becoming increasingly evident that we'll never get a clear picture of Thomas Crooks motivations. A guy with almost no digital footprint, ambiguous political leanings and a search history that indicates interest in targeting both Biden and Trump. So we walk away with a familiar narrative, a lonely, bullied kid. Isolated and powerless, abandoned and politically disillusioned, feeling life was meaningless, lashed out.

News clip: He was always alone. He was always bullied. Every day.

This diagnosis is nothing new. For centuries, philosophers have cautioned about the alienating effects of modernity; from Rousseau's concerns about social fragmentation, to Nietzsche's warning about the death of meaning, to Heidegger's critique of technology, and today these themes continue to resonate in the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. From the disaffected hacker in the Matrix, to the careerist without meaningful connections and up in the air, to the intimacy-starved tech worker in her.

But if there's one film that best represents our futile efforts to address modernity's discontents it's undoubtedly Fight Club, based on the book by Chuck Palanik celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. Few movies so vividly capture why the story of Thomas Crooks is one that we tell ourselves over and over again with no good solutions. So let's revisit this stone-cold classic to see why we fail so hard at escaping the cycle of disillusionment and radicalism.

Tyler Durden: Things you own, end up owning you.

Let's dive in. But first a quick. Recap. Fight Club. Follows an unnamed narrator suffering from insomnia and a soul crushing sense of purposelessness. His only comfort comes from experiencing vicarious desperation by crashing support groups for ailments he doesn't have. His relief is briefly thwarted by a fellow charlatan named Marla Singer, but they strike up a deal to split nights on a business trip. He meets the charismatic

soap salesman Tyler Durden. When his apartment mysteriously burns down, he moves in with Tyler at his dilapidated house on paper. Street together, they find a new outlet for the narrators angst Fight Club Fight Club spreads like wildfire. Tyler starts a relationship with Marla and eventually Fight Club morphs into Project Mayhem, a global movement committed to acts of vandalism. The narrator soon discovers that he and Tyler are the same person to have of a fractured. Like when he learns that Project Mayhem aspires to blow up credit card company headquarters. He tries to. Stop the plan and save Marla. The narrator succeeds in riding Tyler from his mind, but not in foiling his scheme. He holds hands with Marla as the buildings fall the end. Much has been said about the cultural significance of Fight Club over the last 25 years, having been interpreted through a variety of lenses like masculinity, anti capitalism, mental health, etcetera. And while these are all solid takes, I've found that there's a striking overlap between Tyler's prescription for overcoming modern society. And the early work of French philosopher George Bataille, who in the 30s had some pretty wild ideas on how to rediscover an authentic existence and the key to this connection, lies in this subtle, often overlooked part of the film.

The narrator's coworker: Efficiency is priority #1 because waste is a thief.

Here the narrator suddenly dismisses the notion that waste is a bad thing, because according to Bataille, embracing waste or what he also called expenditure was essential to combat a meaningless life. But I argued that reason, a central value of modernity, creates what he calls a homogeneous society. A stifling social order where norms are rigidly codified and controlled, thereby suppressing the dynamic, heterogeneous and intense aspects of human experience. The narrator's world is one such homogeneous society. His job is so meaningless, his daily interactions so tedious. His Co workers, so uniform, and their facelessness that every day is a distant, blurry copy.

The Narrator: Everything's a copy of a copy of a copy.

Crushed by existential despondency, he's even lost the solace of sleep. The men around him, too, are deeply repressed and emasculated. He goes to a support group for men who have literally lost their manly parts.

Bob: We're still men.

The Narrator: Yes, we're men. Men is what we are.

His friend Bob has grown boobs, and one man has been literally cuckolded.

Support group member: She had her first child last week with... with her with her new husband...

Bataille claims that the predominant value of a homogeneous society is Commodity Exchange, in which all social action is reduced to its potential for profit. Before meeting Tyler. The narrator's purpose for living was entirely wrapped up in his condo. Ordering the best furniture, collecting the snazziest clothes, having the top appliances just a little bit more and he could have been complete.

The Narrator: I had it all I had Mr. It was very decent. That. A wardrobe that was getting very. Selectable. Close to being complete.

It even overtook his libido.

The Narrator: We used to read *****. Now it was the Horchow collection.

In such an environment, everything, even human connection can be reduced to discrete transactional units.

The Narrator: The people I meet on each flight, their single serving friends.

So obscene is the reduction of life to financial calculation that if the liability of letting people die using faulty products is cheaper than the recall, the insurance company the narrator works for just lets it happen.

The Narrator: If X is less than the cost of a recall, we don't do one.

Bataille's solution to this suffocating rationality was to indulge in behavior that was radically irrational and destructive. In his words, destruction is the best means of negating utilitarian relation.

Tyler Durden: Self improvement is *****. Of self destruction.

He claimed the glory of military conflict is an end in itself, capable of restoring intimacy in life and bringing one closer to an authentic existence. Enter Fight Club, gentlemen.

Tyler: Gentleman, welcome to fight club.

Tyler and the narrator invigorate a homogenized generation by casting away the stifling obsession with advancement and embracing the senseless frenzy of getting punched in the face by transgressing conventional norms, they reconnect with their more instinctual selves and forge a community based not. Can I be next? On material competition, but a shared primal recognition of the limits of human existence.

The Narrator: You weren't alive anywhere like you were there.

For Bataille, war and conflict were indispensable in dissolving the fragmentation of modern populations. That this lack of conflict left them spiritually restless.

Tyler: We have no great war, our Great War is a spiritual war.

Tyler reintroduces what Bataille called heroic values like struggle, cruelty and risk that he deemed the cure to modern society.

The Narrator: Afterwards, we all felt saved.

But it wasn't just important that these transgressions were destructive, but also that they were purposeless or wasteful.

The narrator's coworker: Efficiency is priority #1, because waste is a thief.

Unlike the narrator's coworker, Bataille did not believe waste as a thief. On the contrary, he saw the capacity to engage in non productive, even destructive activities sacrifice potlatch violence as an essential aspect of pre modern societies that modernity had tragically suppressed. These acts provided a. Desperately needed injection of vitality to social life, Tyler's liberating MO seems to be the pursuit of gratuitously senseless acts, whether that be hitting golf balls at the neighbors or beating your buddy to a pulp.

The Narrator: When the fight was over nothing was solved, but nothing mattered.

The House, on Paper St. embodies this embrace of wasteful irrationality, a proper hole where everything sucks, shoddy electricity, brown water, leaky ceilings. It's the ultimate symbol of their rejection of utility. But Ty argued that a potent expression of wasteful. Expenditure was found in profound loss. Only catastrophe can satisfy certain primal needs that we've lost touch with. The greater the loss, the more that activity can take on its true meaning by experiencing a proximity to loss via support groups, the narrator regains the ability to sleep.

The Narrator: Losing all was freedom.

And at one point, he prays for a plane crash because at least it would feel meaningful. But those are just baby steps towards loss. Tyler pushes him over the edge. First, he burns down the narrator's apartment to liberate him from the grip of material possessions.

Tyler: The Liberator destroyed my property has realigned my perception.

And later, Tyler deliberately crashes their car to feel a quote near life experience.

Tyler: We just had a near life experience.

Such is also the case of Raymond K Hessel, the gas station attendant who gave up on veterinary school only through the threat of profound loss does Raymond break free of his numb existence and remember what it means to be alive.

Tyler: Tomorrow will be the most beautiful day for him. Castles life, his breakfast will taste better than any meal you and I ever taste.

By prioritizing rationality, productivity and comfort, modern society has dulled our senses and severed us from meaning. The only way to break free is intense, wasteful transgression. This is the lesson of Tyler's chemical burn.

Tyler: It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything.

Ultimately, this wasteful action would coalesce into what Bataille called an ecstatic community, a collective forged through shared transgression, just like Fight Club, this group would be bound by modes of social practice that yield no return, whether that be demagnetizing videos at the video store, starting fights with people, and losing. Or replacing safety information cards with absurd ones.

This shared experience of the irrational, bathai believed, could revitalize social life and reawaken a sense of belonging that had been lost.

He also recognized that a strong, charismatic leader could embody the values of the community and serve as a catalyst for collective transgression, but he also had reservations.

Bob: He's a great man. Do you know about Tyler Durden?

There was a risk that the figure could become an object of fascination, leading to the surrender of individual autonomy and a return to homogeneity. And that's exactly what happens to Project Mayhem, a movement that began as a rebellion against a society that flattened everything into mundane. And sameness ends up going even further, and annihilating individuality within its ranks. But instead of a diffuse network of corporations and advertisers dictating behavioral standards, it's a single figurehead the soldiers of Project Mayhem are commanded to shed their names.

Cult member: In Project Mayhem, we have no names.

Burn off their fingerprints with Lye...

Marla: They were burning their fingertips and lie. The stink was unbelievable.

Wear the same clothes and parrot pre programmed responses...

Cult member: Sir, the first rule of Project Mayhem is you do not ask questions Sir.

Their actions are no longer about subversive, wasteful ritual, but a utilitarian goal. Toppling the credit card companies and ushering in a new world order. It's again an army of faceless people, being told what to do and who to be the answer to the problem just recreates the problem in a more insidious form.

In this sense, Fight Club is kind of like Dune and that they both expose the perils of placing blind faith in charismatic leaders.

Interviewer: What is the statement that that you're attempting to make?

Dune author: Well, don't trust leaders to always be right.

Although Dune isn't about lifting a population out of a forlorn social landscape, Paul promises the Freeman messianic deliverance from ruling powers. But spoiler it doesn't turn out so great.

Similarly, Tyler promises liberation from prescribed artificial meaning and ends up creating something even more authoritarian.

So how should we read the ending? Is it a tragic warning about radical ideas? Is it a subversive, celebratory rejection of the status quo? Well, it's important to remember it's a dark comedy, and for me, the ending is a satirical jab at our utter ineptitude at addressing the spiritual void of modernity. A critique that remains depressingly relevant today.

In more vulgar domains of cultural discourse, there's an attempt to suggest that these issues with disaffection are exclusive to people of a particular political persuasion. Some painted as a problem unique among the cultural left adrift and a sea of nihilism disconnected from tradition and prone to blatantly bad ideas and misery.

Or alternately, it's painted as a right wing phenomenon where a bunch of neckbeards can't cope with the world shifting away from their interests, and the resulting perceived loss of status.

But truth is what's been called the Faustian spirit of modernity, or the untethering of social and spiritual bonds due to the relentless pursuit of advancement is a universal problem. Historically, attempts to address the modern condition have come from both the left and the right.

In his book, *The Seduction of Unreason*, historian Richard Wolin chronicles the similarities between the post modernists of the French left during the 60s and 70s, and the counter revolutionaries of the German right in the 20s and 30s. Wolin criticizes

a lot of the same strains of left thought that Jordan. Person does, but rather than Peterson's claim that they were Marxists, Woolen argues that they were Nietzscheans.

Both the left wing flavor of fascism, that Woolen identifies, an early Bataille, and the right wing flavor that led to World War 2 addressed the same anxieties about loss of meaning, and both came up with a lot of bad ideas.

But it would be a mistake. We think that we, unlike the men of Fight Club, are immune to the seduction of such ideas, hindsight or not.

Take, for example, Martin Heidegger. Despite being an unrepentant national socialist till the day he died, he's nevertheless one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, and his critique of modernity remains undeniably compelling.

Heidegger believed that all these problems could be traced back to Plato, who took Western philosophy down the wrong path. When he shifted the concept of truth to a matter of representation or perception, rather than one of concealment, like Heraclitus and Parmenides before him, as a result of this fatal mistake, modern subjects have lost the sense of what it means to be.

I mean, Can you imagine how intoxicating it must have been to be a lost soul in the 30s and be told by a philosopher of almost mythical intellectual prowess that your spiritual malaise is because you along with the rest of the Western world have been existing wrong and that there's a revolutionary moment happening right now that's gonna correct it.

Now the point is not that we ought to sympathize with people who fall in line with regimes like project mayhem or the Third Reich and understand what they were dealing with. No, no, on the contrary, the point is that we're all seriously flawed individuals who are not so great at organizing societies in a way that accommodate these flaws. So, we better be very aware of the ways that revolutionary figures and radical ideas can promise us a way out of these very real issues, pretending the problems aren't real or that only or less noble tribal enemies are vulnerable to them, just ain't gonna cut it.

Walter Benjamin once said, as long as there is still a beggar, there is myth suggesting that so long as there are troubled people trying to make sense of their place in the world, there will be a need for stories that provide meaning to our. Struggles, but I think you can also say that so long as there are myths, the beggar or the society's ailments are laid bare, and this particular myth, probably one of the most discussed films of my lifetime, vividly captures the abyss of modern disaffection, our vulnerability to bad ideas, that promise to address it, and our inability to come up with better ones.

Whereas with other movies about these issues, there's some kind of remedy, the matrix provides hope in the power of love and revolution, office space and finding balance outside of corporate constraints and up in the air and developing meaningful relationships with people. But, with Fight Club, our social reality sucks and our attempts to fix it suck. Even more, just a cycle of disillusionment and radicalism.

There's a popular idea in left circles called capitalist realism. Basically, the idea that capitalism has so thoroughly captured our imagination that it's easier to imagine the

end of the world than the end of capitalism. But I think this concept can be broadened to include the discontents of modernity. Fascism was a reaction to modernity that was a bad idea and we're really bad at coming up with better ones. So, we relent and ignore it because the solution is worse than the problem.

So whenever we hear a story like the one of Trump's would be assassin. We tell ourselves that same old story of how the breakdown of social bonds is creating dangerously miserable people and just say, man, that's sad. Forget about it as quickly as possible and then go back to Hauk Tuah memes. As with modernity, like capitalism, there is no alternative.

The Ted K Archive

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