
Henry A. Giroux

The "public" has been emptied of its own separate contents; it has been left with no agenda of its own—it is now but an agglomeration of private troubles, worries and problems.

—Zygmunt Bauman

In the epigraph above, Zygmunt Bauman gives voice to a troubling feature of American society. Amid the growing privatization of everyday life, the greatest danger to human freedom and democracy no longer appears to come from the power of the over-zealous state eager to stamp out individual freedom and critical inquiry in the interest of loyalty and patriotism. Totalitarianism no longer breeds a contempt for the virtues of individualism, all things private, and the dynamics of self-interest. On the contrary, totalitarianism now resides in a thorough dislike for all things social, public, and collective. Under the growing influence of the politics, ideology, and culture of neoliberalism, Bauman argues, the individual has been "set free to construe her or his own fears, to baptize them with privately chosen names and to cope with them on her or his own" (63).1 Agency has now been privatized and personal liberty atomized and removed from broader considerations about the ethical and political responsibility of citizens to defend those vital institutions that expand the rights and services central to a meaningful democracy. Stripped of its political possibilities and social underpinnings, freedom finds few opportunities for translating private worries into public concerns or individual discontent into collective struggle. Utopia is now conjured up as the privatized space of the shopping mall, intellectual effort is reduced to an instrument of the entrepreneurial self, and social visions are dismissed as hopelessly out of date. Public space is portrayed exclusively as an investment opportunity, and the public good increasingly becomes a
metaphor for public disorder. As the public sphere is consistently removed from social consideration and notions of the public good are replaced by an utterly privatized model of citizenship and the good life, the collapse of public imagination and a vibrant political culture is celebrated by neoliberal warriors rather than perceived as a dangerous state of affairs that Americans should be both contemptuous of and ashamed to support.  

Within the discourse of neoliberalism, issues regarding persistent poverty, inadequate health care, racial apartheid in the inner cities, and the growing inequalities between rich and poor have been either removed from the inventory of public discourse and public policy or factored into talk show spectacles that highlight private woes bearing little relationship either to public life or to potential remedies that demand collective action. Within this growing marketization and privatization of everyday life, democratic principles are either scorned as holdovers of an outmoded sixties radicalism or equated entirely with the imperatives of capitalism (see Mueller). As Robert McChesney argues, Milton Friedman, the reigning guru of neoliberalism, perfectly captures and legitimizes this sentiment in *Capitalism and Freedom*, where he argues unabashedly that "because profit-making is the essence of democracy, any government that pursues antimarket policies is being antideocratic, no matter how much informed popular support they might enjoy. Therefore it is best to restrict governments to the job of protecting private property and enforcing contracts, and to limit political debate to minor issues" (Introduction 9). In neoliberal discourse, freedom is negatively reduced to the freedom from government restraint and the rights of individual citizens to consume as they choose. The state becomes a threat to freedom—particularly the freedom of the market—as its role as guardian of the public interest is actively disassembled, though its powers are still invoked by dominant interests to ensure their own privileges (that is, free trade agreements, government subsidies for business, and strike "negotiations"). However, as Pierre Bourdieu points out, while neoliberals highlight the threat that the state poses to the freedom of the market, the real threat comes from a state that, under the control of neoliberal ideology, is increasingly transformed into a repressive apparatus aimed at those individuals and groups who get caught in its ever-expanding policing interventions. Bourdieu explains,

> In the United States, the state is splitting into two, with on the one hand a state which provides social guarantees, but only for the privileged, who
are sufficiently well-off to provide themselves with insurance, with
guarantees, and a repressive, policing state, for the populace. In Califor­
nia, one of the richest states of the U.S. . . . and also one of the most
conservative, and which has perhaps the most prestigious university in
the world, since 1994 the prison budget has been greater than the budget
of all the universities together. The blacks in the Chicago ghetto only
know the state through the police officer, the judge, the prison warder and
the parole officer. We see there a kind of realization of the dream of the
dominant class, a state which, as Loïc Wacquant has shown, is increas­
ingly reduced to its policing function. (32)

As the laws of the market take precedence over the laws of the state as
guardians of the public good, the state increasingly offers little help in
mediating the interface between the advance of capital and its rapacious
commercial interests, on the one hand, and, on the other, those
noncommodified interests and nonmarket spheres that create the political,
economic, and social conditions vital for critical citizenship and demo­
cratic public life. As the state is hollowed out, forced to abandon its social
functions, its dominant interest is to support the exercise of police power
concerned primarily with surveillance, containment, repression, and
control as it increasingly criminalizes social antagonisms.3 Humanitarian
concerns are largely impotent against the driving interests of capital and
its voracious search for new markets and greater profits. As the welfare
state is dismantled, social agencies aimed at providing crucial social
provisions and a safety net for society’s most vulnerable are replaced by
institutions designed to train rather than educate, punish rather than
nurture, and contain rather than serve the public interest. Rationalized
self-interest goes hand-in-hand with growing incidents of racial injustice,
class injustice, economic downsizing, and the growth of a criminal justice
system that incarcerates youth of color at a rate that exceeds the apartheid
regime of South Africa. As the public good is subordinated to private gain,
public services such as health care, social housing, schools, hospitals, and
transportation are transformed from social investments into profit options
for the powerful and wealthy. As the novelist Walter Mosley reminds us,
“Capitalism has no humanity. All that exists in the capitalist bible is the
margin of profit, the market share, and those quirks of individualism that
must be dealt with in much the same manner as a mechanic must deal with
a faulty element: removal and replacement” (12).

The ascendancy of neoliberalism and corporate culture into every
aspect of American life not only consolidates economic power in the
hands of the few, it also aggressively attempts to break the power of
unions, decouple income from productivity, subordinate the needs of society to the market, and reinterpret public services and amenities as unconscionable luxuries. But it does more. It thrives on a culture of cynicism, boredom, and despair. Americans are now convinced that they have little to hope for—and gain from—the government, nonprofit public spheres, democratic associations, or other nongovernmental social forces. With few exceptions, the project of democratic transformation has fallen into disrepute in the popular imagination as the logic of the market undermines the most basic social solidarities (see Giroux, "Cultural"). The consequences include not only a weakened state, but a growing sense of insecurity, cynicism, and political retreat on the part of the general public. As Bauman insightfully argues, the call for self-reliance betrays a weakened state that neither provides adequate safety nets for its populace (especially those who are young, poor, or marginalized) nor gives any indication that it needs or is willing to care for its citizens. In this scenario, private interests trump social needs, and profit becomes more important than social justice. In Bauman's words,

The more legless is the state, the more its spokesmen spell out the need for, the duty of, its self-reliance, of counting on one's own resources alone, of making one's own balances of gains and losses—in short, of standing of [sic] one's own, individual, legs... [The result is] the brutal tearing up of social solidarities... [as] individuals have been left to lick their wounds and exorcize their fears in solitude and seclusion. (40-41)

The "brutal tearing up of social solidarities" is mediated through the force of corporate structural power and commercial values that both dominate and weaken those competing public spheres and value systems that are critical to a just society and to democracy itself. The liberal democratic vocabulary of rights, entitlements, social provisions, community, social responsibility, living wage, job security, equality, and justice seems oddly out of place in a country in which the promise of democracy has been replaced by the lure of the lottery and the Dow Jones industrial average, reinforced by a pervasive fear and insecurity about the present, and a deep-seated skepticism in the public mind that the future holds nothing beyond a watered-down version of the present. Within the prevailing discourse of neoliberalism that has taken hold of the public imagination, there is no vocabulary for political or social transformation; there is no collective vision; there is no social agency to challenge the ruthless downsizing of jobs or to resist the ongoing liquidation of job security; there are no spaces from which to struggle against the elimina-
tion of benefits for people now hired on a strictly part-time basis. Moreover, against the reality of low-wage jobs, the erosion of social provisions for a growing number of people, and the expanding war against young people of color, the market-driven consumer juggernaut continues to mobilize desires in the interest of producing market identities and market relationships that, as Theodor Adorno once put it, ultimately appear as nothing less than "a prohibition on thinking" itself (290).

It is against this ongoing assault on the public, and the growing preponderance of a free market economy and corporate culture that turns everything it touches into an object of consumption that David Fincher's 1999 film, *Fight Club*, must be critically engaged. Ostensibly, *Fight Club* appears to offer a critique of late capitalist society and the misfortunes it generates out of its obsessive concern with profits, consumption, and the commercial values that underlie its market-driven ethos. However, *Fight Club* is less interested in attacking the broader material relations of power and strategies of domination and exploitation associated with neoliberal capitalism than it is in rebelling against a consumerist culture that dissolves the bonds of male sociality and puts into place an enervating notion of male identity and agency. Contrary to the reviews accompanying the film's premiere that celebrated it as a daring social critique, *Fight Club* has nothing to say about the structural violence of unemployment, job insecurity, cuts in public spending, or the destruction of institutions capable of defending social provisions and the public good (see Maslin; Taubin). On the contrary, the film defines the violence of capitalism almost exclusively in terms of an attack on traditional (if not to say regressive) notions of masculinity, and in doing so reinscribes white heterosexuality within a dominant logic of stylized brutality and male bonding that appears to be predicated on the need to denigrate, and to wage war against, all that is feminine. In this instance, the crisis of capitalism is reduced to the crisis of masculinity, and the nature of the crisis lies less in the economic, political, and social conditions of capitalism itself than in the rise of a culture of consumption in which men are allegedly domesticated, rendered passive, soft, and emasculated.

*Fight Club*—along with films such as *American Beauty*, *Rogue Trader*, *Boiler Room*, and *American Psycho*—inaugurates a new subgenre of cult film that combines a fascination with the spectacle of violence, enlivened through tired narratives about the crisis of masculinity, along with a superficial gesture toward social critique designed to offer the tease of a serious independent or art film. While appearing to address important social issues, these films end up reproducing the very
problems they attempt to address. Rather than turning a critical light on crucial social problems, such films often trivialize them through a stylized aesthetics that revels in irony, cynicism, and excessive violence. Violence in these films is reduced to acts of senseless brutality and pathology and an indifference to human suffering. Reproducing such hackneyed representations of violence ("senseless," "random"), they conclude where engaged political commentary should begin. Yet, I am less interested in moralizing about the politics of Fincher’s film than I am in reading it as a form of public pedagogy that offers an opportunity to engage and understand its politics of representation as part of broader commentary on the intersection of consumerism, masculinity, violence, politics, and gender relations. Moreover, Fight Club points to the role that Hollywood films play as teaching machines. A far cry from simple entertainment, such films function as public pedagogies by articulating knowledge to effects, purposely attempting to influence how and what knowledge and identities can be produced within a limited range of social relations. At the same time, I recognize that, as Eleanor Bryne and Martin McQuillan suggest in a different context, such texts are "radically indeterminate with respect to their meaning, [and] any reading of a text must be determined by factors not prescribed by the text itself" (3-4).

As public pedagogies, texts such as Fight Club attempt to bridge the gap between private and public discourses, while simultaneously putting into play particular ideologies and values that resonate with broader public conversations regarding how a society views itself and the world of power, events, and politics. Reading a film such as Fight Club suggests, in more specific terms, that we must consider how it offers up particular notions of agency in which white working-class and middle-class men are allowed to see themselves as oppressed and inadequate because their masculinity has been compromised by and subordinated to those social and economic spheres and needs that constitute the realm of the feminine.

In taking up these issues, I first analyze the narrative structure of the film, addressing its simultaneous critique of consumerism and its celebration of masculinity. In doing so, I address the representational politics that structure Fight Club—especially its deeply conventional views of violence, gender relations, and masculinity—and I examine how such representations work in conjunction with a deeply entrenched culture of cynicism. Finally, I argue that this cynicism, far from being innocent, works in tandem with broader public discourses to undermine the faith of individuals and groups in their ability to engage in the possibility of a politics designed to struggle against the rising tide of antidemocratic
forces and movements that threaten the already weakened fabric of democracy. Obviously, I am not arguing that Hollywood films such as *Fight Club* are a cause of these problems; rather, they are symptomatic of a wider symbolic and institutional culture of cynicism and senseless violence that exerts a powerful pedagogical influence on shaping the public imagination. In treating *Fight Club* as a pedagogical and political text, my aim is to reveal its socially constructed premises, to demystify its contradictions, and to challenge its reactionary views. In part, I want to ask questions about *Fight Club* that have not been generally asked in the popular press and to engage how dominant public pedagogies prevent us from asking such questions in the first place. In addition, I consider the role that *Fight Club* and other cultural texts might play as public pedagogies that can be read against themselves; that is, I discuss how such texts can be deconstructed and reworked theoretically within a wider set of associations and meanings that can be both challenged and rearticulated in order to strengthen rather than weaken a public politics and further the promise of democratic transformation.

**Fight Club and the Crisis of Everyday Life**

In [commercial cinema's] seeming transformation of violence into entertainment, choreography, and macho ebullience, one could say that the reality of violence has been infantilised. One cannot take it too seriously. And yet, one is compelled to ask if any idiom of violence can be regarded as “innocent,” distanced from reality through its apparent autonomy of signs.

—Rustom Bharucha

White heterosexual men in America did not fare well in the 1990s. Not only were they attacked by feminists, gays, lesbians, and various subaltern groups for a variety of ideological and material offenses, they also had to endure a rewriting of the very meaning of masculinity.⁴ As Homi Bhabha has recently stated, the manifest destiny of masculinity with its hard-boiled, tough image of manliness has been disturbed, and its blocked reflexivity has been harshly unsettled (see “Are You”). Moreover, the shift from an industrial to an information economy—from the production of goods to the production of knowledge—has offered men, at least according to Susan Faludi, fewer and fewer meaningful occupations (*Stiffed*). Consequently, the male body has been transformed from an agent of production to a receptacle for consumption. A rampant culture of consumption, coupled with a loss of manufacturing and middle-manage-
ment jobs produces in white males an identity crisis of unparalleled proportions. The male hero of the modern-day work force is no longer defined by the image of the tightly hewn worker using his body and labor to create the necessities for everyday life. The new work force hero is now modeled on the image of the young, computer-whiz yuppie who defines his life and goals around hot start-up e-commerce companies, day trading, and other get-rich-before-I’m-twenty-one schemes, as well as the conspicuous consumption of expensive products. Moreover, as white, heterosexual, working-class and middle-class men face a life of increasing uncertainty and insecurity, they no longer have easy access to those communities in which they can inhabit a form of masculinity that defines itself in opposition to femininity. In simple terms, the new millennium offers white, heterosexual men nothing less than a life in which ennui and domestication define their everyday existence.

*Fight Club,* which is based on a novel by Chuck Palahniuk, attempts to engage critically the boredom, shallowness, and emptiness of a stifling consumer culture, redefine what it might mean for men to resist compromising their masculinity for the sofa or cappuccino maker that “speaks them,” and explore the possibilities for creating a sense of community in which men can reclaim their virility and power. The film opens with an inside shot of Jack’s brain, tracking a surge of adrenaline that quickly finds an opening in Jack’s mouth and then exits up the barrel of a gun. Jack (played by Edward Norton) then proceeds to lead the audience into the nature of his predicament and in doing so narrates his journey out of corporate America and his evolving relationship with Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt), who functions as Jack’s alter ego and significant other. The first section of the film functions primarily as a critique of contemporary consumerism and how corporate culture positions men in jobs and lifestyles that are an affront to their manhood and male sociality, leaving them to seek refuge in communities of self-help—portrayed as the dreaded cult of victimhood—that only accentuate the contemporary crisis of masculinity. As the film unfolds, Jack is portrayed as a neoliberal Everyman: an emasculated, repressed corporate drone whose life is simply an extension of a reified and commodified culture.

As a recall coordinator, Jack travels around the country investigating accidents for a major auto company in order to decide whether it’s cheaper for the corporation to assign recalls or make payment on a likely number of lawsuits. Alienated from his job, utterly lacking any sense of drive or future, Jack’s principal relief comes from an insatiable urge for flipping through and shopping from consumer catalogues. A slave to the “IKEA
nesting instinct,” Jack self-consciously offers up rhetorical questions such as “What kind of dining set defines me as a person?” But Jack’s IKEA-designed apartment appears to offer him no respite from the emptiness in his life, and his consumerist urges only seem to reinforce his lack of enthusiasm for packaging himself as a corporate puppet and presenting himself as what Tom Peters calls an up-and-coming “brand name.” Tormented by the emptiness of his daily life and suffering from near terminal insomnia, Jack visits his doctor, claiming he is in real pain. His thirty-something doctor refuses to give him drugs and tells him that if he really wants to see pain he should visit a local group for men surviving testicular cancer. Jack not only attends the self-help meeting; he also discovers that the group offers him a sense of comfort and community, and in an ironic twist he becomes a support-group junkie. At his first meeting of the Remaining Men Together survival group, Jack meets Bob (played by Meat Loaf Aday), a former weightlifter who has enormous breasts (described as “bitch tits”) as a result of hormonal treatments. The group allows Jack to participate in a form of male bonding that offers him an opportunity to release his pent-up emotions and provides a cure for his insomnia. Bob becomes a not-too-subtle symbol in the film, personifying how masculinity is both degraded (he has breasts like a woman) and used in a culture that relies on so-called feminine qualities of support and empathy to bring men together rather than on so-called masculine attributes of strength and virility. When Bob hugs Jack and tells him “You can cry now,” Fight Club does more than mock New Age therapy for men; it also satirizes and condemns the “weepy” process of femininization that such therapies arguably sanction and put into place.

Jack eventually meets Marla (played by Helena Bonham Carter), a disheveled, chain-smoking, slinky street urchin who also slums in the same group-therapy sessions as Jack. He views Marla as a tourist addicted only to the spectacle of the meetings. Marla reminds him of his own phoniness and so upsets him that his insomnia returns and his asylum is shattered. Jack can’t find emotional release with another phony in the same session. In the voice-over, Jack claims that “if [he] had a tumor [he] would name it Marla.” Once again, repressed white masculinity is thrown into a crisis by the eruption of an ultra-conservative version of post-1960s femininity that signifies the antithesis of domestic security, comfort, and sexual passivity, offering only neurosis and blame in their place. We now begin to understand Jack’s comment (which occurs at the beginning of the film after the gun is pulled from his mouth) that “Marla is at the root of it.”
On the heels of this loss, Jack meets Tyler Durden on an airplane. Tyler is the antithesis of Jack—a bruising, cocky, brash soap salesman, part-time waiter, and movie projectionist with a whiff of anarchism shoring up his speech, dress, and body language. If Jack is a model of packaged conformity and yuppy depthlessness, Tyler is a no-holds-barred charismatic rebel who, as a part-time movie projectionist, offers his own attack on family values by splicing frames of pornography into kiddie films. When working as a banquet waiter in a luxurious hotel, he urinates into the soup to be served to high-paying yuppy customers. Tyler also creatively affirms his disgust for women by making high-priced soaps from liposuctioned human fat, proudly telling Jack that he is “selling rich ladies their own fat asses back to them at twenty dollars a bar.” Jack is immediately taken with Tyler, who taunts him with the appellation “IKEA boy,” and offers him his personal guide to the pitfalls of consumer culture. Mesmerized by Tyler’s high-octane talk and sense of subversion, Jack exchanges phone numbers with him.

When Jack returns home, he finds that his apartment has been mysteriously blown to bits. He calls Tyler who meets him at a local bar and tells him that things could be worse: “a woman could cut off your penis while you are sleeping and toss it out the window of a moving car.” Tyler then launches into a five-minute cliché-ridden tirade against the pitfalls of bourgeois life, mixing critique with elements of his own philosophical ramblings about the fall of masculinity. He tells Jack that issues such as crime and poverty don’t trouble him. According to Tyler, the real problems men like him confront are “celebrity magazines, television with five hundred channels, some guy’s name on my underwear, Rogaine, Viagra, Olestra.” And as for the IKEA consumer hype of an idyllic domesticated existence, Tyler indignantly tells Jack, “Things you own end up owning you... Fuck Martha Stewart... Fuck off with your sofa units... Stop being perfect. Let’s evolve.” And evolve they do. As they leave the bar, Tyler offers Jack the opportunity to move in with him in what turns out to be a dilapidated, abandoned house near a toxic dump.

Then the magic happens. Before they go back to Tyler’s place, Tyler asks Jack to hit him, which Jack does, and then Tyler returns the favor. Pain leads to exhilaration and they sit exhausted, bloodied, and blissful after their brute encounter. Soon Tyler and Jack start fighting repeatedly in a bar parking lot, eventually drawing a crowd of men who want to participate in brutally pummeling each other. Hence, Fight Club, a new religion and secret society open only to males, is born. Groups of men...
soon afterwards start meeting in the cellar of a local nightclub in order to beat each other’s heads into a bloody mess so as to reclaim their instincts as hunters within a society that has turned them into repressed losers and empty consumers. While Tyler enumerates several rules for the members of Fight Club (“The first rule of Fight Club is that you don’t talk about Fight Club”), the one that actually captures the driving sentiment of his philosophy is the exhortation, “Self-improvement is masturbation; self-destruction is the answer.” For Tyler, physical violence becomes the necessary foundation for masculinity and collective terrorism the basis for politics itself. In other words, the only way Tyler’s followers can become agents in a society that has deadened them is to get in touch with primal instincts for competition and violence; the only way their masculine identity can be reclaimed is through the literal destruction of their present selves (that is, beating each other senseless); and their only recourse to community is to collectively engage in acts of militia-inspired terrorism aimed at corporate strongholds.

Eventually, Jack has second thoughts about his homoerotic attraction to Tyler as a self-styled anti-hero when Tyler’s narcissism and bravado mutates into an unbridled megalomania that appears more psychotic than anarchistic. Before long, Tyler is spending more and more time with Marla, who appears, to Jack’s chagrin, to be having sex with him on an almost hourly basis. And Tyler increases the stakes of Fight Club by turning it into Project Mayhem, a nationwide organization of terrorist thugs whose aim is to wage war against the rich and powerful by defacing corporate-subsidized art and yuppy coffee bars and by blowing up credit card companies. Here, the line is blurred between giving pain and risking death as part of the redeeming power of “masculine recovery” and the performance of barbaric fantasies worthy of the most ruthless right-wing militia movements. Before long, one of Project Mayhem’s terrorist forays is botched and one of their members is killed by the police. The victim is Bob, the large-breasted testicular cancer survivor who has recently reaffirmed his own manliness by joining Fight Club. Jack is shocked by the killing, which in turn enables him to recognize that Tyler has become a demagogue and that Fight Club has evolved into a fascist paramilitary group that is more dangerous than the social order it has set out to destroy.

In a long overdue psychic meltdown, Jack realizes that he and Tyler are the same person, signaling a shift in the drama from the realm of the sociological to the psychological. Jack discovers that Tyler has planned a series of bombings around the unnamed city and goes to the police to turn himself in. But the cops are members of Project Mayhem and attempt
to cut off his testicles because of his betrayal. Once more Jack rescues his manhood by escaping and eventually confronting Tyler in a building that has been targeted for demolition by Project Mayhem. Jack fares badly in his fight with Tyler and ends up at the top of the building with a gun in his mouth. Jack finally realizes that he has the power to take control of the gun and that he has to shoot himself in order to kill Tyler. He puts the gun in his mouth and pulls the trigger. Tyler dies on the spot, but Jack mysteriously survives. Marla is brought to the scene by some Project Mayhem members. Jack orders them to leave, and he and Marla hold hands and watch as office buildings explode all around them. In an apparent repudiation of all that he (Tyler) has been about, Jack turns to Marla and tells her not to worry. He says, "You met me at a weird time in my life," which suggests that life will get better for both of them in the future.

Consumerism, Cynicism, and Hollywood Resistance

Consumerism . . . is less of an ideological falsification of well-being than a mark that no benefit exterior to the system can be imagined.

—Bill Readings

As I have attempted to demonstrate, central to Fight Club is the interrelated critique of late capitalism and the politics of masculinity. The central protagonists, Jack and Tyler, represent two opposing registers that link consumerism and masculinity. Jack represents a generation of men condemned to corporate peonage whose emotional lives and investments are mediated through the allure of commodities and goods. No longer a producer of goods, Jack exemplifies a form of domesticated masculinity—passive, alienated, and without ambition. In contrast, Tyler exemplifies an embodied masculinity that refutes the seductions of consumerism while fetishizing forms of production (ranging from soaps to explosives), the ultimate expression of which is chaos and destruction. Tyler represents the magnetism of the isolated, dauntless anti-hero whose public appeal is based on the attractions of the cult of personality rather than on the strengths of an articulated, democratic notion of political reform. Politics for Tyler is about doing, not thinking. As the embodiment of authoritarian masculinity and hyper-individualism, Tyler cannot imagine a politics that connects to democratic movements, and is less a symbol of vision and leadership for the next millennium than a holdover of early twentieth-century fascism. As the founding father of Project Mayhem—a vanguardist political movement that is hierarchically organized through
rigid social relations—Tyler is a charismatic cult leader who, not insignificantly, is played by the Hollywood superstar Brad Pitt (a contradiction that cannot be overlooked). Project Mayhem is the only enabling force to contest the very capitalism of which it is an outgrowth. If Jack represents the crisis of capitalism repackaged as the crisis of a domesticated masculinity, Tyler represents the redemption of masculinity repackaged as the promise of violence in the interests of social and political anarchy.

While *Fight Club* registers a form of resistance to the rampant commodification and alienation of contemporary neoliberal society, it ultimately has little to say about those diverse and related aspects of consumer culture and contemporary capitalism structured in iniquitous power relations, material wealth, or hierarchical social formations. *Fight Club* largely ignores issues surrounding the break up of labor unions, the slashing of the U.S. work force, extensive plant closings, downsizing, outsourcing, the elimination of the welfare state, the attack on people of color, and the growing disparities between rich and poor. All of these issues get factored out of *Fight Club*’s analysis of consumerism and capitalist exploitation. Hence, it comes as no surprise that class does not operate as a critical category in this film. When working-class people do appear, they are represented primarily as brown-shirts, part of the nonthinking herd looking for an opportunity to release their tensions and repressed masculine rage through forms of terrorist violence and self-abuse. Or, they appear as people who willingly take up unskilled jobs that are dehumanizing and alienating. One particularly revealing scene in *Fight Club* brings this message home while simultaneously signaling a crucial element of the film’s politics. At one point in the story, Tyler takes Jack into a convenience store. He pulls out a gun and forces the young Indian clerk to get on his knees. Putting the gun to the clerk’s head, Tyler tells him he is going to die. As a kind of parting gesture, he asks the clerk, whose name is Raymond, but, he explains, he had to drop out of school due to lack of money. Tyler tells him that if he isn’t on his way to becoming a veterinarian in six weeks he is going to come back and kill him. He then lets Raymond go and tells Jack that the next morning will be the most important day in Raymond’s life because he will have to address what it means to do something about his future. Choice, for Tyler, appears to be an exclusively individual act, a simple matter of personal will that functions outside of existing relations of power, resources, and social formations. As Bhabha points out in a different context, this notion of agency “suggests that ‘free choice’ is inherent in the individual [and]
... is based on an unquestioned ‘egalitarianism’ and a utopian notion of individualism that bears no relation to the history of the marginalized, the minoritized, the oppressed” (“Enchantment” 33).

This privatized version of agency and politics is central to understanding Tyler’s character as emblematic of the very market forces he denounces. For Tyler, success is simply a matter of getting off one’s back and forging ahead; individual initiative and the sheer force of will magically cancel out institutional constraints, and critiques of the gravity of dominant relations of oppression are dismissed as either an act of bad faith or the unacceptable whine of victimization. Tyler hates consumerism, but he values a “Just Do It” ideology appropriated from the marketing strategists of the Nike corporation and the ideology of the Reagan era. It is not surprising that in linking freedom to the dynamics of individual choice, *Fight Club* offers up a notion of politics in which oppression breeds contempt rather than compassion and social change is fueled by totalitarian visions rather than democratic struggles. By defining agency through such a limited (and, curiously Republican) notion of choice, *Fight Club* reinscribes freedom as an individual desire rather than as the “testing of boundaries and limits as part of a communal, collective process” (Bhabha, “Enchantment” 33). In the end, *Fight Club* obscures the sense in which choice is, as Bhabha puts it in another context, a “public demand and duty,” and in doing so restricts the public spaces people are allowed to inhabit as well as the range of subject positions they are allowed to occupy. Hence, it is no wonder that *Fight Club* is marked by an absence of working men and women who embody a sense of agency and empowerment. Instead, the film focuses on largely middle-class, heterosexual, white men who are suffering from a blocked hyper-masculinity.

Consumerism in *Fight Club* is criticized primarily as an ideological force and existential experience that weakens and domesticates men, robbing them of their primary role as producers whose bodies affirm and legitimize their sense of agency and control. The importance of agency is not lost on director David Fincher, but it is restricted to a narrowly defined notion of masculinity that is as self-absorbed as it is patriarchal (see Connell; Berger, Wallis, and Watson; P. Smith). Fincher is less interested in fighting oppressive forms of power than he is in exploring the ways in which men yield to it. *Fight Club* is not simply preoccupied with the depoliticized self; it also lacks a language for translating private troubles into public rage, and as such succumbs to the cult of immediate sensations in which freedom degenerates into collective impotence. Given Fincher’s
suggestion that men have no enduring qualities outside of their physicality, resistance and affirmation are primarily taken up as part of a politics of embodiment that has little concern for critical consciousness, social critique, or democratic social relations. In *Fight Club*, the body is no longer the privileged space of social citizenship or political agency but becomes, as Paul Gilroy suggests in a different context, "the location of violence, crime, and [aggression]" ("After" 58). What changes in *Fight Club* is the context enabling men to assault each other, but the outside world remains the same, unaffected by the celebration of hyper-masculinity and violence that provides the only basis for solidarity.⁶

*Fight Club*’s critique of consumerism fails to address a number of issues. First, the film depicts capitalism and the ideology of consumerism as sutured, impenetrable, and totalizing, offering few if any possibilities for resistance or struggle—except by the heroic few. There is no sense of how people critically mediate the power of capitalism and the logic of consumerism, turn it against itself, and in doing so offer up daily possibilities for resistance, survival, and democratic struggles.⁷ No space exists within the film for appropriations that might offer critical engagements, political understanding, and enlightened forms of social change. Moreover, the film suggests that consumerism can only function within the libidinal economy of repression, particularly as the film moves the male body away from the visceral experiences of pain, coercion, and violence and identifies it with the so-called feminized notions of empathy, compassion, and trust. Hence, the film defines masculinity in opposition to both femininity and consumerism while simultaneously refusing to take up either in a dialectical and critical way.

Second, *Fight Club* functions less as a critique of capitalism than as a defense of authoritarian masculinity wedded to the immediacy of pleasure sustained through violence and abuse. Once again, the film is complicitous with the very system of commodification it denounces since both rely on a notion of agency largely constructed within the immediacy of pleasure, the cult of hyper-competitiveness, and the market-driven desire of winning and exercising power over others. Third, *Fight Club* resurrects a notion of freedom tied to a Hobbesian world in which cynicism replaces hope, and the survival of the fittest becomes the clarion call for legitimizing dehumanizing forms of violence as a source of pleasure and sociality. Pleasure in this context has less to do with justice, equality, and freedom than with modes of hyper-competition mediated through the fantasy of violence. More specifically, this particular rendering of pleasure is predicated on legitimizing the relationship between
oppression and misogyny, and masculinity gains its force through a celebration of both brutality and the denigration of the feminine. Hence, *Fight Club* appears to have no understanding of its own articulation with the very forces of capitalism it appears to be attacking. This is most evident in the way it links violence, masculinity, and gender. In other words, *Fight Club*’s vision of liberation and politics relies on gendered and sexist hierarchies that flow directly from the consumer culture that the film claims to be criticizing.

**Violence and the Politics of Masculinity**

Unlike a number of Hollywood films in which violence is largely formulaic and superficially visceral, designed primarily to shock, titillate, and celebrate the sensational, *Fight Club* uses violence as both a form of voyeuristic identification and a pedagogical tool. Although the film offers up a gruesome and relentless spectacle of bare-knuckled brutality, blood-curdling, and stylized gore, violence becomes more than ritualistic kitsch, it also provides audiences with an ideologically loaded context and mode of articulation for legitimizing a particular understanding of masculinity and its relationship to important issues regarding moral and civic agency, gender, and politics. Violence in *Fight Club* is treated as a sport, a crucial component that lets men connect with each other by overcoming fear, pain, and fatigue, while reveling in the illusions of a paramilitary culture. For example, in one vivid scene, Tyler initiates Jack into the higher reaches of homoerotically charged sadism by kissing Jack’s hand and then pouring corrosive lye on it, watching as the skin bubbles and curls. 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. As grotesque as this act appears, Fincher does not engage it—or similar representations in the film—as an expression of pathology. On the contrary, such senseless brutality is made crucial to a form of male bonding, glorified for its cathartic and cleansing properties. By maximizing the pleasures of bodies, pain, and violence, *Fight Club* comes dangerously close to giving violence a glamorous and fascist edge (see Theweleit). In many respects, the film mimics fascism’s militarization and masculinization of the public sphere with, as Gilroy puts it in another context, its exultation of violence “as a space in which men can know themselves better and love one another legitimately in the absence of the feminine” (*Against* 146). As a packaged representation of masculine crisis, *Fight Club* reduces the body to a receptacle for pain parading as pleasure, and in doing so fails to show how
the very society it attempts to critique uses an affirmative notion of the body and its pleasures to create consuming subjects. Terry Eagleton captures this sentiment in a discussion of Nazi death camps:

Sensation in such conditions becomes a matter of commodified shock-value regardless of content: everything can now become pleasure, just as the desensitized morphine addict will grab indiscriminately at any drug. To posit the body and its pleasures as an unquestionably affirmative category is a dangerous illusion, in a social order which reifies and regulates corporeal pleasure for its own ends just as relentlessly as it colonizes the mind. (344)

But the violence portrayed in *Fight Club* is not only reductive in its affirmation of physical aggression as a crucial element of male bonding; it also fails to make problematic those forms of violence that individuals, dissidents, and various marginalized groups experience as sheer acts of oppression deployed by the state and by racist and homophobic individuals as well as by a multitude of other oppressive social forces. What are the limits of romanticizing violence in the face of those repeated instances of abuse and violence that people involuntarily experience every day because of their sexual orientation, the color of their skin, their gender, or their class status?¹¹ There is no sense in the film of the complex connection among the operations of power, agency, and violence, or how some forms of violence function to oppress, infantalize, and demean human life.¹² Nor is there any incentive—given the way violence is sutured to primal masculinity—to consider how violence can be resisted, alleviated, and challenged through alternative institutional forms and social practices. This lack of discrimination among diverse forms of violence and the conditions for their emergence, use, and consequences—coupled with a moral indifference to how violence produces human suffering—makes *Fight Club* a morally bankrupt and politically reactionary film (see also Keane). Representations of violence, masculinity, and gender in the film seem to mirror the pathology of individual and institutional violence that informs the American landscape, extending from all manner of hate crimes to the far Right’s celebration of paramilitary and proto-fascist subcultures.

*Fight Club* does not rupture conventional ways of thinking about violence in a world in which casual violence and hip nihilism increasingly pose a threat to human life and democracy itself. Violence in this film functions largely through a politics of denial, insulation, and disinterest. As a consequence, the film is unable to consciously criticize the very
violence that it gleefully represents and celebrates. *Fight Club* portrays a society in which public space collapses and is filled by middle-class white men—disoriented in the pandemonium of conflicting social forces—who end up with a lot of opportunities for violence and with few opportunities (perhaps even none at all) for argument and social engagement (see Bauman; Boggs; Cappella and Jamieson; Chaloupka; Goldfarb; and Jacoby). Macho ebullience in the film is directly linked to the foreclosure of dialogue and critical analysis and moves all too quickly into an absolutist rhetoric that easily lends itself to a geography of violence in which there are no ethical discriminations that matter, no collective forces to engage or stop the numbing brutality and rising tide of aggression. While Jack renounces Tyler’s militia-like terrorism at the end of the film, it appears as a meaningless gesture of resistance, as all he can do is stand by and watch as various buildings explode all around him. The message here is entirely consistent with the cynical politics that inform the film: violence is the ultimate language, referent, and state of affairs through which to understand all human events, and there is no way of stopping it. This ideology becomes even more disheartening given the film’s attempt to homogenize violence under the mutually determining forces of pleasure and masculine identity formation. It strategically restricts our understanding of the complexity of violence, and, as Susan Sontag suggests in another context, “dissolv[es] politics into pathology” (qtd. in Becker 28).

The pathology at issue—and one that is central to *Fight Club*—is its intensely misogynist representation of women, and its intimation that violence is the only means through which men can be cleansed of the disastrous effect that women have on shaping their identities. From the first scene of the film to the last, women are cast as the binary opposite of masculinity. Women are both the Other and a form of pathology. Jack begins his narrative by claiming that Marla is the cause of all of his problems. Tyler consistently tells Jack that men have lost their manhood because they have been feminized; they are a generation raised by women. And the critical commentary on consumerism presented throughout the film is really not a serious critique of capitalism as much as it is a criticism of the feminization and domestication of men in a society driven by relations of buying and selling. Consumerism is criticized because it is womanish stuff. Moreover, the only primary female character, Marla, appears to exist both to make men unhappy and to service their sexual needs. Marla has no identity outside of the needs of the warrior mentality, the chest-beating impulses of men who revel in patriarchy and enact all
of the violence associated with such traditional, hyper-masculine stereotypes. But representations of masculinity in *Fight Club* do more than reinscribe forms of male identity within a warrior mentality and in the space of patriarchal relations. They also work to legitimize unequal relations of power and oppression while condoning a view of masculinity predicated on the need to wage violence against all that is feminine both within and outside of their lives. Masculinity in this film is directly linked to male violence against women by virtue of the way in which the film ignores and thus sanctions hierarchical, gendered divisions and a masculinist psychic economy. By constructing masculinity on an imaginary terrain in which women are foregrounded as the Other, the flight from the feminine becomes synonymous with sanctioning violence against women as it works simultaneously to eliminate different and opposing definitions of masculinity. Male violence offers men a performative basis on which to construct masculine identity, and it provides the basis for abusing and battering an increasing number of women. According to the National Center for Victims of Crime Web site, an estimated six million women are assaulted by a male partner each year and of these almost two million are severely assaulted (see "Domestic Violence"). Affirming stereotypical notions of male violence while remaining silent about how such violence works to serve male power in subordinating and abusing women creates and legitimizes the pedagogical conditions for such violence to occur. *Fight Club* provides no understanding of how gendered hierarchies, mediated by a misogynist psychic economy, encourage male violence against women. In short, male violence in this film appears directly linked to fostering those ideological conditions that justify abuse towards women. It links masculinity exclusively to expressions of violence and defines male identity against everything that is feminine.

*Fight Club* as Public Pedagogy

Terrible things, by continuing to be shown, begin to appear matter-of-fact, a natural rather than man-made catastrophe. Zygmunt Bauman has labeled this the "production of moral indifference."

There is a link between epistemology and morality: between how we get to know what we know (through various, including electronic media) and the moral life we aspire to lead.

—Geoffrey Hartman
While *Fight Club* generated a number of critical commentaries, few reviewers addressed the misogynist nature of the film or the warrior mythology of the 1980s that it so closely resembles ideologically and politically (see Gibson). For example, Janet Maslin not only defended the film as a serious attempt to examine the “lure of violence” in a “dangerously regimented, dehumanized culture,” she also condemned as mindless those critics who might view the film as a nihilistic “all-out assault on society.” Oddly enough, Twentieth Century Fox, the studio that produced *Fight Club*, viewed such criticism as dangerous rather than simply mindless, and proceeded to withdraw all of its movie advertising in the trade paper *The Hollywood Reporter* because it had published two critical reviews of the film. While such politics are not new to Hollywood, the overt attempts by a major studio to censor the voices of dissent—because some critical reviews speak to the willing use of political power by corporate institutions in the cultural sphere to close down democratic relationships, denigrate women, and celebrate mindless violence—should nevertheless elicit public outrage. Certainly, Twentieth Century Fox has little to fear from “progressive” critics who largely praised the film. For example, Amy Taubin extolled the film for “screw[ing] around with your bio-rhythms” and for expressing some “right-on-the-zeitgeist ideas about masculinity” (16). Taubin, it seems, was also bowled over with Brad Pitt’s new-found masculinity, claiming Pitt has never been “as exquisite as he is with a broken nose and blood streaming down his cut body” (17). Faludi made the remarkable statement that *Fight Club* is a “quasi-feminist tale” (“Thelma” 89). It seems that the connection between *Fight Club*’s underlying misogynist premises and its similarity to a number of recent Hollywood films that offer denigrating images of women has been lost on critics such as Maslin, Taubin, and Faludi. It gets worse. The online journal *Slate* argued that veteran rock video director Fincher had transformed cinema with his hip digital editing style and that the “most thrilling thing about *Fight Club* isn’t what it says but how . . . Fincher pull[s] you into its narrator’s head and simulate[s] his adrenaline rushes” (Edelstein; emphasis added).

*Fight Club*’s overall success with a large number of critics was also buoyed by an ongoing series of interviews with its stars as well as a number of well-placed interviews with Fincher (see G. Smith; Strauss). Edward Norton, for example, argued that the film is about young men having a problem defining their manhood and that it has little to do with fighting: “The fight club is not about fighting; it is a manifestation of a desire to strip away everything and rediscover yourself” (Koltnow).
Norton goes so far as to claim that the film is really a comedy similar to the classic coming-of-age film *The Graduate*.

One of the more incredible, if not entirely inane, comments came from Helena Bonham Carter, who defended the film by claiming that Fincher is a feminist. In describing why she took on the role of Marla, she said, "The script was awfully dark, and in bad hands it could have been immature or possibly even irresponsible. But after meeting him, I could tell that it wasn't going to be a concern. He's not just an all-out testost package. He's got a healthy feminist streak" (Svetkey 28).

Fincher appeared at times to be caught on the defensive in having to provide some theoretical explanation and ethical justification for the film. Claiming that *Fight Club* is a film "that's downloaded in front of you. It doesn't wait for you," he seemed to suggest that many critics were tripping over themselves trying to understand the film (Svetsky 26). He has also argued that while the film is a coming-of-age narrative, he doesn't "purport for a second to know what a film should be, what entertainment should be, how much it should teach, how much it should titillate." (And, of course, the implication is that neither should his audience.) He said, "I'm just trying to make a good, funny movie" (Svetkey 31). Fincher's comments are more than disingenuous; they represent, at the very least, an apologetic discourse for the increasing merger of over-the-top violence, hyper-masculinity, and sexist representations of women in Hollywood films (see Giroux, Fugitive; Channel).

All of these comments exhibit a cavalier indifference to the ways in which films operate as public pedagogies within a broader set of articulations. That is, they ignore how such films function as public discourses that address or at least resonate with broader issues in the historical and socio-political context in which they are situated. There is no sense of how *Fight Club*—or films in general—bridges the gap between public and private discourses, and plays an important role in placing particular ideologies and values into public conversation while offering a pedagogical space for addressing specific views of how everyday lives are intertwined with politics, social relations, and existing institutional formations. For instance, Fincher seems completely unaware of how his portrayal of violence and hyper-masculinity resonates with the reactionary mythology of warrior culture that reached its heyday during Ronald Reagan's presidency and found its cultural embodiment in figures such as John Wayne and Oliver North as well as in a host of Hollywood movies celebrating rogue warriors such as *Lethal Weapon, Missing in Action, Robocop*, and *Rambo* (see Jeffords).15
Given the enormous violence, misogyny, aggression, and political indifference that permeates contemporary daily life, it is crucial to understand how representations of male violence, scorn for everything that is feminine, and a proto-fascist politics in a film such as *Fight Club* resonate with a broader assemblage of historical and contemporary forces to reproduce rather than challenge some of the more oppressive forces in American society. Clearly, the film’s director, actors, and many critics appear completely indifferent to the kind of ideological work that this film performs in linking masculinity, violence, and politics at a historical moment when public politics is collapsing into privatized discourses and pleasures, and when the crisis of masculinity is widely perceived as the most important manifestation of changing economic conditions. While it would be easy to dismiss the comments made by Fincher, Norton, and Bonham Carter as nothing more than self-serving publicity—or simply as idiotic in light of the representational politics of the film—such comments exemplify a period in which, as Hannah Arendt has pointed out in another context, violence might best be understood less by connecting it to people who are “cold-blooded enough to ‘think the unthinkable,’” [than to the fact] that they do not think” (108). Against the emergence of films such as *Fight Club* and the refusal on the part of critics and others to link the violence in the film to the violence directed against women, public life, and democracy itself, progressives and others must question not only the conditions for the production of such films, but also how they work to construct particular definitions of agency. Such questions are crucial if progressives are going to explore what tools are needed to resist romanticized notions of violence and masculinity.

In opposition to films such as *Fight Club*, progressives must consider developing pedagogies of disruption that unsettle the commonsensical assumptions and ways of thinking that inform films and other cultural texts, particularly those that construct and legitimize certain subject positions, identities, values, and social relations that both celebrate a pathologizing of violence and render hyper-masculinity as a space in which to reinscribe the hierarchies of gender, race, sexuality, and politics. As James Snead argues,

mass culture in America today consists of an entirely new set of artifacts—mass visual productions. These new artifacts require new ways of seeing and new ways of thinking about what we are seeing. . . .

We have to be ready, as film-goers, not only to see films, but also to see through them; we have to be willing to figure out what the film is claiming to portray, and also to scrutinize what the film is actually
showing. Finally, we need to ask from whose social vantage point any film becomes credible or comforting, and ask why. (131, 142)

But this should not suggest that educators, progressives, and others simply must teach students the skills of critical literacy in order to demythologize representations of violence or to engage gendered representations, for instance, in radically new ways. This strategy is important but inadequate. We must go beyond questions of literacy and critique to issues of politics, power, and social transformation.

At the very least, the production of films such as *Fight Club* suggests that progressives need a new civic language and vocabulary to address the relevance of culture, politics, and pedagogy in order to understand not just how to read texts critically, but also how to comprehend how knowledge circulates through various circuits of power in order to put into place images, experiences, representations, and discourses that objectify others and create the ideological conditions for individuals to become indifferent to how violence in its diverse expressions promotes human suffering. This project involves developing forms of public pedagogy that critically engage how language, images, sounds, codes, and representations work to structure basic assumptions about freedom, citizenship, public memory, and history. Progressives must also become attentive to how the material relations of power that produce and circulate forms of common sense can be challenged and transformed on both a national and transnational level. In this instance, public pedagogy links knowledge to power in an effort to understand how to effect social change. At stake here is both recognizing and developing a new vision of what we want the future to be, and struggling to acknowledge that the fundamental nature of cultural politics and knowledge production has not only changed dramatically in the last fifty years but that the culture industries and visual culture have become the primary pedagogical and political forces (and spaces) in shaping consciousness and legitimating dominating social practices. This is not meant to suggest that culture exists in opposition to what some have called a material politics as much as it points to the necessity of recognizing the pedagogical nature of any attempt to both unlearn and to relearn what it might mean to challenge those commonsense assumptions and institutional forms that shape oppressive relations, regardless of how and where they manifest themselves.

Films such as *Fight Club* become important as public pedagogies because they play a powerful role in mobilizing meaning, pleasures, and identifications. They produce and reflect important considerations of
how human beings should live, engage with others, define themselves, and address how a society should take up questions fundamental to its survival. At the same time, if we are to read films such as Fight Club as social and political allegories articulating deeply rooted fears, desires, and visions, then these films must be understood within a broader network of cultural spheres and institutional formations rather than as isolated texts. The pedagogical and political character of such films resides in the ways in which they align with broader social, sexual, economic, class, and institutional configurations.

Needless to say, Fight Club (as well as any other cultural text) can be read differently by different audiences, and this fact suggests the necessity of interpreting such texts in the specificity of the contexts in which they are received. But, at the same time, educators and social critics can shed critical light on how such texts work pedagogically to legitimize some meanings, invite particular desires, and exclude others. Acknowledging the educational role of such films requires that educators find ways to make the political more pedagogical. One approach would be to develop a pedagogy of disruption that would attempt to make students more attentive to visual and popular culture as important sites of political and pedagogical struggle. Such a pedagogy would raise questions regarding how certain meanings under particular historical conditions become more legitimate than others as representations of the real, or how certain meanings take on the force of commonsense assumptions and go relatively unchallenged in shaping a broader set of discourses and social configurations. Such a pedagogy would raise questions about how Fight Club, for instance, resonates with the social locations and conditions of fear, uncertainty, sexism, and political despair in which many people now live their lives. More specifically, a pedagogy of disruption would engage a film’s attempts to shift the discourse of politics away from issues of justice and equality to a focus on violence and individual freedom as part of a broader neoliberal backlash against equity, social citizenship, and human rights. Such an approach would not only critically engage the dominant ideologies of masculinity, violence, and sexism that give Fight Club so much power in the public imagination, but also work to expose the ideological contradictions and political absences that characterize the film by challenging it as symptomatic of the growing reaction against feminism, the right-wing assault on the welfare state, and the increasing use of violence to keep in check marginalized groups such as young black males, who are now viewed as a threat to order and stability.
Any attempt to critically address *Fight Club* and its implications for the changing nature of representational politics must also acknowledge that power is never totalizing and that even within an increasingly corporatized social landscape there are always cracks, openings, and spaces for resistance. *Fight Club* reminds us of the need to reclaim the discourses of ethics, politics, and critical agency as important categories in the struggle against the rising tide of violence, human suffering, and the specter of fascism that threaten all vestiges of democratic public life. Precisely because of its ideological implications, *Fight Club* challenges anyone concerned with the promise of democracy and with what it might mean for critical intellectuals to take a stand against the dominant media, while providing opportunities to develop what Paul Gilroy calls in another context, “minimal ethical principles” (*Against 5*). At the heart of such an engagement is the need to accentuate the tension between the growing threat to public life and the promise of a democracy that both remembers the history of human suffering and works to prevent its reoccurrence. The political limits of *Fight Club*’s attack on capitalism and consumerism should point to the need for a more sustained and systematic critique of the dire conditions of contemporary social life.

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**Notes**

1. In McChesney’s words, neoliberalism is the “defining political economic paradigm of our time—it refers to the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximize their personal profit” (Introduction 7). Neoliberalism results in “a massive increase in social and economic inequality, a marked increase in severe deprivation for the poorest nations and peoples of the world, a disastrous global environment, an unstable global economy and an unprecedented bonanza for the wealthy” (Introduction 8).

2. While this issue is taken up in too many books to cite, some good general introductions to both the neoliberal indifference to social considerations and the growing indifference to democracy itself can be found in Greider; McChesney, *Rich*; Mokhiber and Weissman; Sennett; and Willis. For a personal and moving account of the slide into moral indifference and the collapse of the public sphere and its safety nets for children, see Kozol.

3. See Hardt and Negri, who argue that this is one of the central features of the bold new order of globalization, which they call “empire,” that now characterizes the twenty-first century.
4. Needless to say, feminist and gay theorists have been analyzing the politics of masculinity for quite some time. For an important series of theoretical analyses on the changing nature of masculinity in Hollywood cinema that draws on many of these traditions, see Cohan and Hark.

5. Peters adds a new twist to the application of the logic of the market to everyday life by arguing that we should define ourselves as saleable items—that is, as commodities. According to Peters, the one sure way of being successful in life is to market yourself as a brand name—or, as Peters puts it, “It’s this simple: You are a brand. You are in charge of your brand. There is no single path to success. And there is no one right way to create the brand called You. Except this: Start today. Or else” (94).

6. See Kelley for an interesting commentary on the way in which dominant forms of masculinity work to reproduce particular notions of racism.

7. See Miklitsch for an insightful analysis of what might be called the dialectic of consumerism.

8. An antecedent for the high-octane celebration of masculinity and violence might be Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. Tarantino inaugurated a Hollywood film genre of cheap imitations that James Wolcott labels “scuzzi cinema.” According to Wolcott, “scuzzi cinema earns its name from the pervasive, in-your-face, foulmoutheduzziess of its low-life characters, situations, and atmosphere, all of which convey the bottom falling out of civilization” (148). The infatuation with violence, cynicism, glitz, and shootouts in diners got a remake by adding a more updated gesture towards social relevance—that is, a critique of suburban life, consumerism, and so forth—that can be seen in films such as *Fight Club*.

9. See Bordo, who offers a number of critical insights about the relationship between art and its growing tendency to celebrate and become “more symptomatic of the pathologies of our culture than exposing of them” (17).

10. Nadine Hoover argues that there is something “terribly wrong with our society when abuse becomes a means of bonding” (qtd. in Jacobs 36).

11. One wonders how Fincher would retheorize the relationship between misogyny and the celebration of violence in *Fight Club* in light of the recent attack by mobs of young men against a number of women in Central Park after the Puerto Rican Day parade in New York City in the summer of 2000. Of course, it would be fatuous to claim that utterly misogynist films such as *Fight Club* are directly responsible for the recent incident in which fifty-six women were attacked by roving bands of young men who doused them with water, groped them, and ripped off their clothes. But I don’t think it would be unreasonable to argue that misogynist films such as *Fight Club* help to legitimate such acts, because they exercise a pedagogical force shaped largely by a dominant politics of sexist representations that contributes to an increasing climate of hatred and objectification of women.

12. Commenting on the kinds of violence that are often ignored, Sklar writes, “Imagine sustained national attention to the violence to the mind, body,
and spirit of crumbling schools, [or to] low teacher expectations, employment and housing discrimination, racist dragnets, and everyday looks of hate by people finding you guilty by suspicion" (52-53).

13. See Bly for one of the most popular celebrations of this warrior mentality. See Gibson for a sustained critique of this position.

14. This issue is explored by Modleski in her analysis of a number of Hollywood films. See especially 61-75.

15. Of course, this type of representation is ubiquitous and can be found in recent films such as Saving Private Ryan, The Thin Red Line, and Three Kings.

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