Reader Response

*Fight Club*: Historicizing the Rhetoric of Masculinity, Violence, and Sentimentality

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Henry Giroux has written a powerful denunciation of the film *Fight Club*. He needed to do this not just because the film might encourage violence, and not just because the film advocates a male revolt against feminized culture. Giroux has made a more difficult but much more important point: he argues that the film seems to have a critical edge; but it does not acknowledge the real problem, and it instructs us to represent our problems in ways that may make us even more powerless. It seduces us with the pleasure of expressing rage against the constraints of everyday life in a culture that seems both impersonal and feminized. Giroux argues, however, that the sense of agency in that violent expression of male bodies is a delusion. What makes men such as the unnamed protagonist and narrator of the film (played by Edward Norton) into a cubiced servant of faceless bosses, a tearful self-help groupie, and the consumer of identity-defining furniture is not evidence of a feminized culture but the privatization of democratic politics. We are, Giroux argues, losing any sense of public space and public action: “totalitarianism now resides in a thorough dislike for all things social, public, and collective” (1).

Edward Norton plays a character who pretends to be the victim of testicular cancer and other afflictions for which there is a group remedy. He moves into a fantastic dump in a bad neighborhood with the anti-victim Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt) when his apartment and all his well-matched furniture mysteriously blow up. Tyler Durden introduces him to the pleasures of fist fighting, and Fight Club provides an appealing remedy to the sad pursuit of sympathy. The rules of Fight Club delineate the ethic: “You do not talk about Fight Club. You do not talk about Fight
Club. When someone says, 'Stop,' or goes limp, the fight is over. Only two guys to a fight. One fight at a time. No shirts, no shoes. Fights go on as long as they have to. If this is your first night at Fight Club, you have to fight." As a substitute for rhetorical conversation, Fight Club at least acknowledges that setting parameters is necessary. This sense of limits, however, is violated later in the film, and Fight Club becomes an organization that is more political and less rational: at the end of the film, as if in fulfillment of anarchic expectations, the skyline explodes.

Giroux argues that Fight Club teaches us once again that it is up to private individuals to make the ethical choices that could change things. The remedy for thinking of ethics as if it were like choosing furniture (the [feminized?] consumerist model) or even as if it were available in the proliferating culture of self-help groups (a feminized consensus sympathy) is not, Giroux argues, violent and masculinist self-assertion. The film is particularly dangerous because it uses the emotions generated by appeals to the body—the physical violence of a first fight—to define a sense of male rage and provides the illusion of freedom through anarchic destructiveness. Furthermore, Giroux believes that the film is dangerous because many critics have been seduced by it—if not by its critique of American culture, then by the aesthetic brilliance of its director David Fincher.

In a review of the film, Jenny Brown says, "if you're willing to let yourself get caught up in the anarchy, this film . . . is a modern-day morality play warning of the decay of society." It is not clear, however, whether the descent into anarchy is the problem or the cure, although Brown suggests that Fight Club, which she describes as a "nationwide fascist group," is what the film warns about. Other reviewers, however, see Fight Club as liberatory: a rebellion "against middle-class notions of masculinity" "designed to alleviate male angst" and the "male malaise"; a cure for "self-loathing," or for "men's loss of role" and "the emasculation of the male in modern society"; it is a film about "seemingly castrated men" who, because they are "a generation raised by women, with no major war or cause to call their own," need "a good swift kick in the huevos to remind them who they are"; it is a film about "one man's journey from that of a corporate/social drone to that of a free-thinking individual" (see Maslin; M. Clark; Pattenden). John Shirley thinks that the film marks a trend, that movies such as Twelve Monkeys, The Matrix, PI, American Beauty, and now Fight Club "are really about how we're sick of our own mindless, stupidly overgrown, top-heavy, corporation-shackled, toxi-
fied, greedy, self-centered, overpopulated, media saturated, disposable-culture, center-less compass-less civilization.” Are the mayhem-creating paramilitary groupies of Fight Club the danger, or the civilized credit-card culture they terrorize? Or, is the real danger an imbalance in the gender wars created by feminism, and Fight Club the self-help group that will let men be men again? Most reviewers agree that the film is about masculinity inasmuch as fighting becomes the remedy. The idea that such an expression of gender identity could be liberatory is what Giroux so thoroughly challenges, and I could hardly fail to agree. He argues that indeed the film represents a new totalitarianism because it satirizes self-help groups and offers no remedy for corporate oppression.

I do not agree with Giroux entirely, however. It is important to think about how gender conventions operate historically and how they are mobilized in the film. Seen from the perspective of gender alone, Fight Club does not promote the privatization of everyday life because the domestic, consuming individual (object of middle-class desire) is feminine, and that feminine domestic life is the life the hero must blow up. Although masculinity, violence, fascism, and anarchy seem to be linked in the film, powerful agency is represented as a figment of a collective, somewhat paramilitary imagination, the artifact of group-think (or should I say club-think?) and male bonding.

It is important to remember gender history and Nancy Armstrong’s Desire and Domestic Fiction can help us here. She argues that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sentimental fiction produced, together with the rising middle class, the feminine individual, located within a domestic family space of consumption and privacy where sentiments must be tender, soft, and sympathetic. Middle-class manliness arises as a difference from women thus constructed as ideal objects of desire; a public realm of homosociality and male bonding takes shape in relationship to this other private sphere. Late capitalism has not given up its reliance on the idea these stories promoted of the individual and the private as well as the idea of male privilege.

If the film Fight Club reasserts a masculine identity threatened by the feminization of American culture, then it reiterates a theme more than a hundred years old. Theodore Roosevelt took up the manly sport of boxing at Harvard when he was an undergraduate and recommended western ranch life in the 1880s to ward off the dangers of feminine sentiment and a softening of manliness. He was concerned about making manhood visible too, and he made sure to take one of the very first film crews to capture pictures of his Rough Riders riding up Kettle Hill in the battle for
San Juan, Puerto Rico. They rode up twice, in fact—the second time without bullets for a better filmic record. A generation later, Ernest Hemingway, influenced by Roosevelt, interested himself in sports that brought men into a confrontation with violence and death: bullfighting, hunting, fishing, and, of course, boxing. His relationship to the feminine and the sentimental was admittedly complex, not simply reactive, after the traumatic experience of being wounded during World War I. However, his sense that manliness was threatened reinforced the cultural history of modernism.

The manly reaction against femininity is a gendered dynamic in the history of the sentimental. Critics such as Ann Douglas, Jane Tompkins, Lori Merish, Marianne Nobel, and Elizabeth Barnes have shown the importance of the sentimental tradition and debated its politics, tracing the significance (and dangers) of sympathy to American nationalism. Since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a rhetoric identified with the feminine has developed that not only advocates tenderness, an ethic of care, and attention to feeling, but also represents a powerful campaign on behalf of largely middle-class reforms. After the successes of women in abolitionist movements, women organized for reform against other social ills. A century ago, as now, activist women seemed to be making progress toward political change. Women writers such as Helen Hunt Jackson (who misunderstood much) and Native American women such as Zitkala-Sa worked for support of Native peoples. Social workers such as Jane Addams called attention to the needs of immigrants and the poor in cities. The suffragettes had widespread support in their advocacy of women’s rights. Other projects joined women and the churches. The long, largely female campaign of temperance organizations against the evils of alcohol eventually led to Prohibition. Women writers sold their art, fiction, and poetry to large audiences and in so doing defined a mass culture, and their work often had a rhetorical appeal to moral and political action. These victories—always impure and associated at times with bad politics and undesirable consequences—generated a powerful reaction against feminine politics and women’s rhetoric.

As I have argued in *Sentimental Modernism*, modernist writers and artists (those who succeeded in dominating the discussion) repudiated women’s political and artistic work together with the sentimentality associated with it. Modernists criticized the growth of industrial capitalism and the narrow morality of middle-class gentility. The revolutionary politics of the early 1900s joined anarchists, socialists, communists, and artists in revolt. However, even though Emma Goldman was an anarchist
celebrity and Gertrude Stein was "the mother of us all" for the Lost Generation of writers, women and the sentimental rhetoric associated with femininity were violently repudiated. In the new Soviet Union, Lenin told Emma Goldman that she was "sentimental" because she advocated free speech for the anarchist participants in the revolution. By the 1920s, modernism asserted itself as an aesthetic rather than as political violence—the "shock of the new"—and even though modern art and modern poetry might be seen as anarchic because they revolted against traditional forms, the sense of a political struggle dropped away.

The fact that a masculinized and anarchic revolt used a gendered distinction between masculinity and femininity also dropped away. Modernism in the arts came to establish itself as a non-gendered aesthetic version of innovation and progress, with a political reactionary such as Ezra Pound or an insurance executive such as Wallace Stevens or a sexual extremist such as Pablo Picasso as its unquestioned exemplars. A focus on aesthetics rather than on cultural history and politics led to a certain amnesia about the struggle over gender. The amnesia was so effective that several generations of women studied an American history, literature, art, and politics that ignored contributions of women (ask anyone who graduated before 1980). The amnesia was so complete that feminists in the 1970s often believed they were inventing feminism for the first time. The amnesia threatens us still, because even though we recognize that we are involved in cultural struggles over gender, we are in danger of forgetting how gender has been manipulated in earlier struggles for power and how much women have lost.

In Cold Warriors: Manliness on Trial in the Rhetoric of the West, I examine the way a struggle for and about men after World War II obsessively repeated and reinscribed images of male power at the same time that masculinity—and the nation—seemed threatened (by communism as well as by "momism" or the feminine). Yet, in a continuation of modernist practices, the rhetoric of dominant national figures (from scientists to politicians) and literary critics simply denied that gender was an issue and indeed forcefully insisted on the genderless universality of their perspectives. Is this superiority that pretends to be unmarked by gender (or by race or class) less dangerous than the gendered images of supermen and John Wayne that appeared in mass culture?

Recent attention to masculinity has been supported by feminist critics (including myself) who believe that gendering men—like making whiteness identifiable as a racial position—makes critical analysis possible. It
is particularly important to realize that gender plays a part in rhetoric when struggles over issues seem not to be about gender. This is not because gender necessarily organizes cultural history in predetermined ways, but because gender has defined so much of American cultural history. Thus, it determines the rhetorical force and implications of arguments at a level that could be called a “gendered unconscious.” The gendered unconscious around violence has much to do with a reassertion of an American individuality against social forces that define proper emotion. Masculinity becomes antisocial once it becomes visibly gendered. Real men don’t cooperate, and those who do cooperate may be ungendered men—perhaps cosmopolitan, universal citizens. The association of gendering with certain emotional appeals is a historical inheritance, neither the figment of a single director’s imaginary invention nor a necessary convention. It is possible to argue that Fight Club’s satirical edge helps make associations of masculinity and violence more visible and even to critique them.

Individual private efforts will not change discursive conventions much or how pathos might be effective with audiences. But Giroux believes—as do feminist rhetorical theorists such as Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva—that film and other arts have a pedagogical function. They can change culture. What I would add to Giroux’s analysis is this: it is extremely important to think about how the effects of that pedagogical function become culture. This public function operates, Butler and Kristeva theorize, not only as a conscious argument but also in the body of the argument, as it is portrayed, in repetitions and style. It is through this “bodied” rhetoric that conventions of discourse, including those of gender, can be changed.

Film portrayals of postwar masculinity have again and again returned to the scene of the idea of “regeneration through violence” that Richard Slotkin locates at the center of American culture. Each return marks changes—that is, subtle or large differences in the relationships within male culture as well as changes in the ways that femininity marks a border for the masculine. In 1948, Howard Hawks’ film Red River showed a split in male culture. The patriarch Tom Dunson (played by John Wayne) is unyielding in his demands on his men and on his adopted son Matt Garth (played by Montgomery Clift). Matt is a softer, less absolute character who rebels against his father and usurps his leadership. Their differences collide in the final scenes of the film in a fight between father and son, and it is the physical contact of the fight that resolves what threatened to be fixed in a more deadly way by the father’s stubbornly shooting his son
rather than backing down from principle. One could argue that Matt marks the emergence of a different kind of postwar hero in Hollywood cinema: a male figure who emerges from what Vito Russo calls the “celluloid closet.” Here, masculine identity suggests homosexual themes and relationships even though the narrative does not openly admit them. Furthermore, a scene in Red River might give us a clue to the function of the gun in Fight Club—specifically, the scene in which Matt shows his gun to another in a sexually suggestive way. In Fight Club, Norton’s character seems to be reticent, for a good part of the film, about promoting Fight Club and its values even as he is transformed by them. Norton and Brad Pitt seem to portray their characters in a homoerotic relationship that goes beyond male bonding in its intimacy, and the gun in the mouth of the anti-hero (played by Norton) at the beginning and at the end of the film seems more than anything to portray a sexual act.

In the 1960s, Ken Kesey’s One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest portrayed a brawling hero, R.P. McMurphy, who tries to win freedom for himself and other inmates of an insane asylum from Nurse Ratched (Big Nurse) and her therapeutic oppression. Jack Nicholson plays McMurphy in the film interpretation of the novel. He invites the other men on the ward to realize their manhood through fighting, sex, fishing, and gambling. Big Nurse might be seen as the bureaucratic version of industrial momism, with her controlling routines and her insistence that she knows what’s best for the men. Kesey’s narrator, Chief Bromden, also associates her with the forces of capitalism that destroyed the Columbia River’s Celilo Falls by building a dam and destroying the long tradition of salmon fishing and trading for his people, the Columbia River Indians. The sociopathic, anarchic McMurphy prefigures later heroes of green politics and anarchism who put their bodies on the line for masculine freedoms, such as Edward Abbey’s outrageous George Washington Hayduke in The Monkey Wrench Gang. After McMurphy and Hayduke, Fight Club’s Tyler Durden is a recognizable type. But can he exist in the era of self-help groups and international credit cards? Is anarchism still possible? Does the character mean the same thing?

After Vietnam, with its particular damage to American nationalism and the male hero, the “hard bodies” of film in the Reagan era, figured a turn to a visible masculinization of America that, as Susan Jeffords argues, depended on “a systemic interdependence between individual and nation as linked through the masculine body” (14). She makes a distinction between the “vigilante” films of the 1970s, such as Clint Eastwood’s Dirty Harry, and the “hard body” films of the 1980s: “Harry’s heroism has
a nihilistic edge to it. . . . The heroes of hard-body films suggest a different kind of social order, one in which the men who are thrust forward into heroism are not heroic in defiance of their society but in defiance of their governments and institutional bureaucracies” (19). Jeffords names as representatives of this 1980s masculinity *Rambo: First Blood, Part 2; Missing in Action*; and *Uncommon Valor*. Her emphasis on the figure of the solitary individual taking action because public agencies have failed to represent the average individual suggests a linkage to the situation analyzed by Giroux. Both Jeffords’ “hard body” films and *Fight Club* show male heroes whose private violent acts substitute for a public ethical agency.

But what if a brilliant artistic representation of violent acts could open up the possibility of critiquing the gendered and violent fate we seem to see repeated across the past century and more? How else will we change the discursive configuration that so hampers our capacity to reason together? I’m not sure Giroux sees the possibility that the aesthetic could serve a rhetorical function (as pedagogy) in this kind of disruptive way. I am also not sure that the defenders of the *Fight Club* aesthetic aren’t in danger of contributing, as Giroux charges, to the same powers of capitalism and hidden violence (hidden behind clean bosses and the bills from credit cards) that make audiences identify with the film’s paragon of rage, Tyler Durden. If mirror relationships alone define us, the film does us damage in giving us such a face. If, in contrast, we come to see, perhaps to laugh about, and finally to critique how much we (you know, women’s masculine side included) enjoy the escalating anarchy within, perhaps that somewhat distanced male extremity can leave a space for some public discussion. Many of the reviews of *Fight Club* have noted that the film has prompted debate. Whether that debate functions to enhance or to erode democratic exchange depends on the differing receptions of the audience to masculinist and sentimentalist rhetoric and the differing results of appeals to pain. Young audiences—male and female alike—love the film. Do they love the reiteration of male rebellion in a way that suggests that *Fight Club* is this generation’s *Rebel Without a Cause*? Or, do they love the satire of anarchic male excess? What changes in the history of this struggle have been enacted in *Fight Club*?

I do worry that Giroux is correct—that the film simply underscores an increasingly dangerous antipathy to any public order. In any event, because its advertising and its reviews all emphasized its violence, one important change has not occurred: many thoughtful women and men that I know who abhor male violence have not gone to see the film, and one
more opportunity to think about the relationship between male violence and female sentimentality has been foreclosed. Perhaps the only way to resist this recuperation by late capitalism of a film that so strongly appeals to the pleasures of illicit fighting is to engage in the other kind of fight—to continue appealing to the more intellectual pleasures of rhetoric through critical argument.

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