


**Fight Club’s Queer Representations**

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In “Breaking into the Movies: Pedagogy and the Politics of Film,” Henry Giroux persuasively argues that film not only entertains but also teaches subjectivity. He writes that film in particular “does more than entertain; it offers up subject positions, mobilizes desires, influences us unconsciously, and helps to construct the landscape of American culture...Put simply, films both entertain and educate” (585). In Giroux’s view, films not only provide us with representations of particular subject positions, they also teach us what the available subject positions are. That is, films teach us how to be gendered, raced, classed, and sexed subjects, and even what genders, races, classes, and sexualities are available. Giroux provides the term “public pedagogy” to describe the kind of teaching that film and other forms of popular entertainment perform and tells us that as
an example of public pedagogy "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" ("Private" 6).

Giroux feels that filmmakers should be aware of and take responsibility for what their films teach. In his critique of *Fight Club* in a recent issue of *JAC*, Giroux takes David Fincher, the film’s director, to task for exhibiting “a cavalier indifference to the ways in which films operate as public pedagogies within a broader set of articulations” ("Private" 21). Specifically, Giroux argues that Fincher’s film teaches misogyny because masculinity in *Fight Club* 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” (19). Here, Giroux argues that masculinity in *Fight Club*, a film in which no physical violence against women is depicted, is directly linked to male violence against women because the gendered divisions between male and female are never addressed. Within the context of public pedagogy, then, I’d like to examine the way that *Fight Club* both reinforces heteronormativity by using homoeroticism to represent self-destruction, but also makes available some queer representations of masculinity that subvert heteronormativity. My purpose here is to spotlight how an analysis of a homoerotically charged film such as *Fight Club*, even in the context of the film’s heteronormative bias, can be used to interrupt the production of a normalized gender.

The film’s homoerotic credentials are multiple. For example, the film begins and ends with Jack, Ed Norton’s character, sitting in a chair, restrained, with Tyler Durden’s gun in his mouth. The phallic symbolism is obvious. *Fight Club* the novel emphasizes the sexual symbolism even more than the film, opening with the line “Tyler gets me a job as a waiter, after that Tyler’s pushing a gun in my mouth . . .” (11). The first, short chapter is filled with references to the gun in his mouth, the tonguing of it, the adjusting it in his mouth to be more comfortable, the worry about the cleanliness of the gun. Jack notes, for example, that with “a gun stuck in your mouth and the barrel of the gun between your teeth, you can only talk in vowels” (13). While the novel’s author, Chuck Palahniuk, makes frequent references to the *sexual* desire that exists between many of the men in the novel, there are also references to *romantic* desire between men. In the novel, Jack makes this desire explicit in the first chapter,
claiming that he, Tyler, and Marla Singer “have a sort of triangle thing going here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me” (14). Jack is not only sexually attracted to Tyler Durden, he is also in love with him. When Durden has his gun shoved down Jack’s throat, Jack reminds us of that “old saying, how you always kill the one you love, well, look, it works both ways” (13).

My claim here is not that Durden and Jack are really gay. As both the novel and the film make clear, the center of the tension is Marla Singer. Jack notes that “the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer” (14). The homoerotic element, however, simply will not go away (until the end of the film, when Durden and therefore the homoerotic element is eliminated). Not only is homoerotic sexual and romantic desire one of the main characteristics of the relationship between Jack and Durden, it also is prevalent in many other areas of the film. One of Durden’s jobs, for example, is to splice together individual reels of film so that a film projectionist doesn’t have to worry about the stopping of one reel of a film and the starting of another. As a form of subversion, Durden splices frames from pornographic movies into the films. In the film version of *Fight Club*, the pornographic frame is shown twice—once near the beginning of the film and once at the end, just before the credits roll. The image on screen is the same in each instance: an extreme close up of a white man’s genitals. In another scene, Jack hesitantly fondles a lifelike model of male genitals that he sees on Marla’s dresser. Thus, the film depicts three, screen-size images of male genitals as well as the suggestions of male-on-male fellatio that begin and end the film and countless other homoerotic references. The very first fight between Jack and Durden, for example, ends with the two men smoking cigarettes and reflecting on the satisfaction of the release that the fight provided.

When I viewed the film, the reasons for the homoeroticism puzzled me. It seemed to serve no purpose, particularly as at the end of the film Jack and Marla Singer are happily holding hands, Tyler Durden exists no more, and office buildings all around them are collapsing (a scene that resonates differently in light of the events of September 11). Palahniuk’s novel, however, is far more suggestive on the purpose of the homoerotic attraction. In the novel, Jack reflects that maybe “self-improvement isn’t the answer. . . . Maybe self-destruction is the answer” (49). The homoeroticism, in my view, is a part of the self-destruction.

That homoerotic desire in film signals destruction, despair, and tragedy is nothing new. In recent film history, for example, we have Hedwig of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, a character whose sex-change
operation was botched and who ends up with a one-inch mound of flesh in place of standard-issue genitals. In the film, Hedwig is ultimately successful in her career but is very lonely. In the final image of the film, Hedwig is disconsolate because she has been abandoned by the man she loves. In *Rock Star*, the characters played by Mark Wahlberg and Jennifer Anniston are seduced by Tonya, whom they do not realize until the morning after is a pre-op transsexual, with breasts and a penis. Until the point of the film that Tonya is revealed as a transsexual—when she is seen standing up to urinate—she is considered by the audience to be a beautiful object of desire. After that point in the film, the audience audibly groans with disgust and titters when Tonya is on screen. In commenting on Tonya, another character in the film says, “Well, we know what she is.” Tonya is, among other things, a symbol of the perversion and self-destruction that ultimately characterizes the film’s version of hard rock music.

In another example of homoeroticism as the foreshadowing of tragedy in *Rock Star*, Bobby Beers, lead singer of the film’s imaginary band, Steel Dragon, fears that he is being replaced by the Wahlberg character because Beers is gay. Again, up until the point in the film when the character reveals that he is gay, he is an object of sympathy. The writers of the film quite consciously have Beers repeat word-for-word the lines that the Wahlberg character said when he was kicked out of his band in an earlier scene. At the moment that Beers reveals that he is gay, however, he becomes for the audience a figure of disgust and fun. At the point of revelation, people in the audience began to laugh at his misery, even though it is precisely the same as the misery suffered by this character and sympathetically witnessed by the very same audience two scenes earlier. Thus, this character, in the queer space of gay man and heavy-metal rock star, is like Tyler Durden—first reviled and then eliminated. Finally, and perhaps most famously, the main character Brandon Teena in the recent Academy Award winning film *Boys Don’t Cry* is ultimately raped and murdered for inhabiting a queer space.

While Giroux may be correct that *Fight Club* is misogynist, I would like to offer a queer reading of this film. In my view, such a reading is necessary if only because it gives instructors in rhetoric and composition an opportunity to talk about not only the anti-gay bias of the film but also something else: the indeterminate space of queer. That Jack loves and desires Tyler Durden is clear; that Jack is not gay also seems clear. What are we to make of a man who desires another man sexually but is not gay? Presenting the film in these terms offers students the opportunity to
rethink what it means to be a man. What, for example, do students make of the character named Bob? Bob, played by Meatloaf, a man who as a result of cancer had his testicles removed and consequently developed breasts, might be considered by some to be a symbol of misogyny because as an emasculated man he is somehow less than a man and therefore the object of scorn that is usually reserved for women. A different and possibly more productive reading of this film to offer students might be to suggest that Bob inhabits a queer space—that is, he stands on the divide between man and woman, having breasts but no testicles. What, we might ask, does it mean to be a man without testicles, or a man with breasts? Or, alternatively, if we conceptualize Bob as a woman based on his lack of testicles and his possession of breasts, we might ask what it means to be a woman with a penis. Questions such as these complicate essential questions about gender by suggesting that the divide between the genders is not as clear cut as we might think.

In order to augment this reading, I would ask students to consider Rolling Stone’s promotional material for the film version of Fight Club, which features a heavily eroticized Brad Pitt in a number of dresses. Much about the cover image of Pitt suggests a heavily eroticized queer space. In this image, Pitt’s famous body is on display. Uncharacteristically, however, he is wearing a short, sleeveless, sundress. His legs are spread. One hand is encased in a heavy latex glove, while the other holds a cigarette a few inches from his closed mouth. His legs and arms are well-muscled—beautifully defined, gym-toned muscles that were developed for their beauty rather than their utility. Pitt’s muscles, in other words, are like gay men’s muscles, in place largely for their aesthetic appeal rather than for their usefulness. Pitt, obviously, doesn’t need to be strong in order to lift and carry heavy objects. Thus, muscles such as these represent an indeterminate, queer space—strong like a man, beautiful like a woman. Furthermore, the photographer and stylist emphasize Pitt’s crotch in a number of ways that place his crotch in a queer space between man and woman, a space that suggests both genders but also neither gender. What is obvious on the original cover but less clear in the web version is the mound of Pitt’s genitals. In the original cover photograph, the bulge of Pitt’s crotch is obvious, enhanced by an image in the dress of a long, narrow fruit and one, ball-shaped fruit that stands at the narrow fruit’s base. Clearly, the image on the dress that lies atop Pitt’s crotch and nowhere else in the dress pattern suggests the male genitals with one missing testicle, a reference to the film—in which Bob most prominently is a character without testicles—but also a sly reference to the queer
representation in this film of gender itself. The emphasis on Pitt's crotch is enhanced by two other visual elements: his spread legs and the suggestive ashtray at his hip. Pitt's spread legs, of course, provocatively suggest Pitt's sexual availability in a pose generally reserved for women, specifically for prostitutes who are open for business. Simultaneously, however, the platform on which Pitt reclines leads the viewer's eye away from his crotch to a space off the screen. In other words, the "V" that leads away from Pitt's crotch is as suggestive as the "V" that leads toward it. We don't know exactly what we're getting up inside his dress nor at the end of the "V" that leads off the page. This juxtaposition of "V" shapes works to confuse the reader even further and to reinforce Pitt's queer gender position. Pitt's indeterminate gender status is further confirmed by the only sensuous element in the photograph: the curving, yellow ash tray that clearly, with its openness and its two-lip structure, suggests a vagina. Thus, while Giroux may be correct that this film is misogynist, this film is also queer. This film does not simply denigrate women (if that is in fact what it does), it also suggests the possibilities for an eroticized, pleasurable queer space where men don't have testicles and where women have penises.

Other images of Pitt from inside Rolling Stone suggest the possibility of a queer, eroticized space. In one medium close-up shot, Pitt is wearing a black, apparently latex glove, the prominent middle finger of which he holds in his mouth. The way in which he clenches the middle finger in his teeth while simultaneously pulling the glove away from his mouth makes him look as though he is chewing an erect, black penis. At the same time, however, Pitt is wearing a large, round, rhinestone earring that is about four inches in diameter. This image reproduces the connotations of the cover image—the penis and the vagina, with Pitt as the receiver of the penis and the carrier of the vagina.

The final image that I will describe here combines a number of disparate elements: the beautiful masculine body, the swimming goggles, the (spray-painted) silver wrestling boots, and the silver lamé cocktail dress. This image unapologetically combines the masculine and the feminine by displaying Pitt's body in an athletic pose but also in a cocktail dress. The silver wrestling boots evoke and feminize the predominately male sport of wrestling. In addition, the stylish swimming goggles suggest both the sometimes masculine sport of swimming but, like wrestling, invoke as well a sport heavily eroticized by and participated in by gay men.

Thus, in my view, Fight Club offers some very interesting opportu-
nities to talk about both heteronormativity and queer space. The film in particular takes pains to eroticize the combination of the masculine and the feminine. Of course, ultimately, in both the film and the novel Tyler Durden (and the transgendered space he represents) is destroyed. It turns out that he was just a figment of the protagonist’s imagination, the fate, as we have seen, that in some version awaits many film characters that inhabit the queer space between genders.

Even though *Fight Club* does provide excellent opportunities to think about gender normativity, in my view it is important to remember that this film values hegemonic masculinity. Geoffrey Sirc, in his response to Giroux’s article, for example, asks how “a film can be said to reinscribe white heterosexuality when it is popular among gay males” (428). Even though this film might be popular among gay men, the film does ultimately end with a man and a woman holding hands at the top of an important, downtown building. The homoerotic element—Tyler Durden—has been eliminated, proven to be nothing more than a figment of the heterosexual imaginary. And while many gay men might enjoy, for example, watching football (some because they like watching or playing the sport and some because they admire the players’ bodies), I think we cannot make the claim based on the fact that some gay men like football that football doesn’t represent and reinscribe intensely heterosexual values, even if those values rely on homoeroticism. To ignore the fact that *Fight Club* is heteronormative is, I think, to relegate the question of heteronormativity to a position of no importance.

Suzanne Clark’s response to Giroux is much more accurate with regard to its suggestion that the characters played by Norton and Pitt are in a homoerotically charged relationship that appears repeatedly in the history of film. Clark writes that *Fight Club* “suggests homosexual themes and relationships even though the narrative does not openly admit them” (417). Clark’s assessment is a strong beginning to the recognition of the homoeroticism of *Fight Club*. The film’s queer element—and the queerness of other artifacts of popular culture—however, remains to be explored. Much is to be gained from analyses of popular culture that emphasize queer elements. A queer analysis can help deconstruct, however temporarily, traditional gender constructs and over time alter what it means to say that you are a man or to say that you are a woman. Queer lives and queer studies have much to offer the mainstream, heterosexual majority when it comes to challenging predetermined gender identities.

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Notes

1. The photographer refused permission to reproduce these photographs for reasons that his assistant in a phone conversation with me would not specify. If you would like to view the pictures, however, they were available at the time of this writing at http://www.rollingstone.com. Once there, click on the “Photos” link. Type “Brad Pitt” into the search window, then click on the link to “Stills from the movie Fight Club.” The pictures under discussion here are in the October 28, 1999 issue of Rolling Stone.

Works Cited


