How much can you really know about yourself
if you never go at it, one-on-one?

-- Tyler Durden

*Fight Club* (1999, FOX), Chuck Palahniuk’s book-turned-film, is about the struggle to overcome alienation, most profoundly, alienation from oneself. In the film, this is most obviously played out in the life of the unnamed protagonist and narrator (played by Edward Norton and called ‘Jack’ in the script), and his alter-ego, Tyler Durden (played by Brad Pitt). Jack is an insomniac, numbed by his formulaic job. His strategy for finding fulfillment consists of a two-pronged lived lie: he defines himself by reference to his designer products, especially furniture, and he finds affirmation in support groups for diseases he feigns. The strategy is reflected back to him as a lie when another poser, Marla Singer (played Helena Bonham Carter), starts showing up at his meetings, forcing him to look elsewhere for his fix. After a few beers too many one night, Tyler and Jack cast off received norms and act on an impulse to fight – to playfully, yet brutally take turns throwing punches at one another – only to discover what the film depicts as the exhilarating, liberating feeling of being truly alive. Nor is this effect lost on on-lookers, whose enthusiasm affects the mushrooming of the activity into an organized, frequently recurring, nocturnal event. Thus is Fight Club born.

The film traces not only (i) Jack’s development of and obsession with his alter-ego, Tyler, but (ii) his growing awareness of conflict with it, and (iii) the attempt to overcome the conflict. This process plays out as a schizophrenic dialectic of numbing *madness*, on
the one hand, and reactionary bliss, on the other, ultimately overcome by transcendence of both.

Although I believe the film (perhaps unwittingly) follows a trajectory through 19th century German philosophers’ analyses of alienation, I propose to focus in particular on connections with Hegel’s influential parable about alienation and overcoming, the parable of the master and slave, from his *Phenomenology of Mind*, of 1807.

I. The Problem: Alienation (madness)

It is fitting to begin our story with the kind of alienation most blatant at the film’s outset – the kind underscored by the Marxist analysis of the “ideology” provincial to *capitalism*. The categories derived from this system structure Jack’s consciousness, his view of the world and himself. As an actuary, he makes his living doing cost benefit analysis for a major automobile company, objectifying others’ lives, and reducing them to numbers by

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1 Which, I argue, is itself converted into a form of madness.
2 Indeed, this is a story about all who would aspire to transcend internal conflicts, to reach true self-knowledge and freedom. We each embody such conflicts due in part to “contradictions” in the forces that mold us, that structure our aspirations, and values. The development of Jack’s self-consciousness points the way to freedom for us all.
3 Nobody else, including *Fight Club*’s author, Chuck Palahniuk, seems to take my tack on this. For instance, recounting her interview with Palahniuk, Emily Jenkins, with help from Palahniuk, makes the “claim” or “moral of the story” out to be the following. In order to create an authentic identity these days, we need to reject our cultural training, and “rupture social norms,” do what’s “forbidden”: “In *Fight Club*, it was that we are taught to avoid violence” (*Village Voice*, “An Interview with Thrill-Seeking Novelist Chuck Palahniuk: Extreme Sport” Oct 13-19, 1999). On this interpretation, the status of violence is obscured.
   The probable lack of correspondence between my interpretation and the authorial intention should not be seen as disheartening. Palahniuk would allow that the central theme of the plot is alienation. The phenomenon of alienation is open to exploration by means of a number of devices – philosophical, literary, cinematographic. In effect, I’m suggesting that perhaps the exploration of this theme through the medium of film is so truthful that it converges with other explorations, with or without the “consent” of those involved in the process. This is corroboration, analogous to putting scientific principles to the test in different contexts, if you will.
4 I think the film affirms and works through themes in Kant, then Hegel, Marx, and perhaps, ultimately, Nietzsche. But that is a longer story than I will tell here.
5 As historian of ideas, George Armstrong Kelly (1977), puts it, this is a story of a broken ego, striving to restore itself (176).
6 Forays into Kant, Marx, and Nietzsche will consist of mostly hand waving.
   It will become clear as we proceed that I think *Fight Club* lends itself simultaneously to a variety of levels of interpretation. Similarly, Kelly (1977) has cogently argued that Hegel’s parable is legitimately subject to social and personal interpretations and a third, on which we witness “a fusion of the other two processes: the interior consequences wrought by the external confrontation of the self and the other, the other and the self, which has commenced in the struggle for recognition” (175). Unfortunately, or, you might think, fortunately, I will not be able to uncover all of the riches here.
weighing them against automobile recall costs. Likewise, with an all-too-easy cynicism, Jack refers to his friendly fellow sojourners as “single serving friends” – you know, the kind you use and then dispose of.

But it is deeper than that. Capitalism provides the categories in terms of which he thinks about himself, and defines his identity. The corollary of the capitalist mentality is the consumerist one. Jack, as narrator, asks, “What kind of dining room set defines me as a person?” and confesses, “I loved that condo…. Everything -- the lamps, the chairs, the rugs -- were me.” At one point, we are treated to a Jack’s-eye-view of the world: each object is seen as literally featuring a price tag and catalog description.

As Jack’s self-consciousness – his awareness – grows, he becomes suspicious of the consumerist world-view’s increasingly hollow-sounding promise of fulfillment. “We were raised by television to believe that someday we'll all be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars – but we won't. And we’re learning that fact.” This madness begins to be seen as a form of slavery. Tyler describes a “whole generation,” slaves manipulated by advertising to chase cars and clothes, working … jobs they hate, just so they can buy shit they don't really need.” Just beneath the surface of these consumerist categories, nihilism festers. Jack describes his condition thus: “I am helpless. I am stupid and weak and all I do is want and need things. I am SHIT!”

The diagnosis Jack achieves is an essential step toward freedom; but he knows not the

7 Jack: “My job was to apply the formula. It's simple arithmetic…. You take the number of vehicles in the field (A) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (B), multiply the result by the average out-of-court settlement (C). A times B times C equals X. If X is less than the cost of a recall, we don't do one.”

8 Like the kind of coping-humor found under the tents of the MASH 4077th, even Jack’s wit reflects this alienating objectification of others. Like much sarcasm, it is parasitic on the incongruity between actually operative categories and the kind that (it is perhaps vaguely sensed) ought to be in effect.

9 There is an illusion on which buying from elite catalogs helps one be unique – which, of course, is precisely what that does not accomplish. It’s a smokescreen. Jack: “My hand-blown green glass dishes with the tiny bubbles and imperfections, proof they were crafted by the honest, simple, hard-working indigenous peoples of … wherever.”

10 My italics.

11 Jack confesses: “I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. If I saw something like the clever Njurunda coffee tables in the shape of a lime green Yin and an orange Yang -- I had to have it.”

12 Whatever color their collars, slaves: “Advertising has them chasing cars and clothes.”

13 Note the ‘slave’-rhetoric here, which will take on increased significance in light of Hegel and Marx. Tyler: “The strongest and smartest … who have ever lived [are] pumping gas and waiting tables; or they're slaves with white collars. Advertising has them chasing cars and clothes.”
cure. So, as he makes that unavoidable call to his alter-ego, Tyler, he mumbles his plea to himself in the only way he knows how, in the form of a kind prayer: “Tyler Durden. Rescue me…. Deliver me from Swedish furniture. Deliver me from clever art…. Deliver me.” The underground Fight Club is born out of this need to replace the emptiness of the prevailing world-view.

II. Categories: A Sketchy Background

Our operative Hegelian and Marxist notions of categories are philosophically parasitic on the work of the late 18th century philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who argued intricately that a set of categories necessarily structures the way we perceive our world and ourselves. Where Kant’s categories were applied to the world, which he conceived as being there, independent of our awareness, Hegel repudiated such a separate, hidden world. Instead, the world is – to use a common metaphor – projected by the subject. Hence, disunity in the world is disunity in the subject. But, as Hegel’s tale of the subject goes, although there may not be unity, the teleological struggle tends toward it. So the evolution of the

14 Kant had argued that there is a fixed set of Categories in terms of which we must view the world, in terms of which we must “structure the input,” as it were. And this set of Categories is part of the make-up of subjectivity. This being so, what “the world” is in itself is not a sensible question. In Kant, on the one hand, the Categories make possible any experience at all (indeed, they provide us a way of unifying or “synthesizing” disparate elements of experience, of carving up the world into objects and events, rather than buzzing, booming confusion); on the other hand, their seat in us also means we are alienated from the world – or at least from things “as they are in themselves” (our knowledge is not a direct reflection of the world, but of our subjectivity).

15 Hegel’s attitude toward Kant’s “things in themselves” – from which we are alienated – is, in the colloquial, “Who needs ’em?” What need have we of “things in themselves” – the world independent of the subject? “Indeed, none!” declares Hegel. Hegel converts Kant’s absence of knowledge into knowledge of absence. Hegel’s knowing subject, like Kant’s, synthesizes a manifold; but in Hegel’s picture, unlike in Kant’s, there are no “things in themselves” presupposed, so the source of the material synthesized is the subject itself. To put it too roughly: Live with the world as experienced by the subject, and let that hidden world fall away. But Hegel trades this form of alienation from the world-in-itself for another, as we’ll see.

16 It’s worth mentioning that Kant’s account of the categories is integral to his account of the unity of self-consciousness, since Hegel’s turns out to be, as well. And Marx, in turn, drew inspiration in part from this segment of Hegel’s corpus, on the development of self-consciousness.

The subject projects an Other, an objectivity, it projects a world, including a full plurality of elements to be synthesized, unified, according to categories. In Hegel, these categories evolve, becoming ever more suitable for imposing unity on the world – unlike the stable set of Categories invoked by Kant’s subject. Through a dialectical process, they bring ever-increasing unity to “the world.” This dialectical process is full of tensions between opposing categories, and is played out on the battlefield of history. As the process continues, however, tensions give way to more encompassing categories in which earlier conflicting ideas are synthesized. The world is always undergoing progress toward more unity and rationality. In fact, says Hegel, the conclusion of this progress will be achieved when all oppositions give way to the unity afforded by an all-encompassing category (the nature of which we cannot conceive), which Hegel calls the Absolute Idea.
categories that bring unity to the world is at the same time the story of the self’s realization or achievement of unity with itself, self-consciousness, or, as Hegel says, true self-knowing freedom.

But now, back to the struggle for freedom from oppressive categories, and the search for a cure.

III. The Solution: Fight? (bliss)

The rising tide of rebellion against the categories first shows its momentum in an outwardly directed way, in the form of unfocussed, subversive pranks: Tyler “splices single frames of genitalia … into family films”; as a waiter, he urinates into the soup he ladles. But the growing self-awareness does lead to a more profound turn inward, toward the self. In the establishment of Fight Club, the protagonists embrace and face pain and fear “head-on,” as it were, through organized fighting, which produces a kind of bliss. Participation in the Club is a way of (1) rejecting imposed norms and values, (2) venting generalized resentment due to alienation, and (3) feeling “in touch” with what is thought to be one’s true nature.

Spurred by rising self-conscious awareness of oppression, Fight Clubbers become reactionaries, defining themselves by contrast with the opposition’s categories: They are anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist. Tyler’s Messianic mantra runs: “You are not your job. You are not how much money you have in the bank.” The members objectify others, even bosses, differently. Jack explains: “I’d look at some asshole and know I could beat

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17 This is, of course, most famously true at the level of the World Spirit. But it’s also characteristic of the individual consciousness.
18 Jack: “He was a guerrilla terrorist of the food service industry.” Also (from the script):
   Ricky and another FIGHT CLUBBER paste up a BILLBOARD which reads: "DID YOU KNOW? YOU CAN USE YOUR OLD MOTOR OIL TO FERTILIZE YOUR LAWN! – ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY."
19 As I’ll argue, I think this is an illusion fostered by not following through on all the “morals of the story.”
20 They are also anti-pleasure, anti-convenience, and anti-appearance. Again, Tyler, in reaction to a billboard advertising jeans and featuring a shirtless man: “Is that what a man looks like?” Jack: “Isn’t it?” Tyler: “Guys packing into the gyms, all trying to look like what Calvin Klein says. Fight club isn’t about looking good.”
him.” Former oppressors are no longer seen as superior, but are fit into the categories of the new world-view.  

I take it as pretty well known that Hegelian dialectic is characterized by the passage from a thesis, which generates an anti-thesis, to a higher synthesis, which captures all that was valid in the precursors, while leaving both behind as mere partial truths. Roughly, if capitalism is thesis, Fight Club is anti-thesis. And, against this background, one needs all of the prophetic anointing of a slug to infer that neither thesis nor anti-thesis here is final. To anticipate, my story will be that the satisfaction derived from the anti-capitalist categories is short-lived and unstable, and, ultimately, gives way to a “higher synthesis.”

Toward this synthesis we press on.

IV. Toward the Higher Synthesis

There are two, more profound, yet subtle, roles of fighting, both of which find expression in Hegel’s parable: fighting creates a context in which members of the Club (4) struggle for recognition, or acknowledgment, and (5) confront fear, which, it turns out, is a condition of freedom.

In Hegel, the self becomes aware of itself only through the mediation of an other, which, importantly, reflects Recognition, or acknowledgment, back to it. Early in the film, Jack gets a pale version of the Recognition he seeks at support groups for terminal illnesses, where, “... If people think you're dying, they really listen, instead of just waiting for their turn to speak.” After Marla Singer ends Jack’s charade, he’s forced to look

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21 “A BMW pulls up and HONKS at the Bruised Valet [member of fight club]. The bruised Valet has no reaction as a FAT EXEC gets out of his car and tosses the keys. Jack watches the Bruised Valet size up the Exec, then hop into the car and loudly PEEL OUT” (Jack).
22 See fn. 16.
23 Again, this is one level of interpretation of the film. See fns. 6 and 3.
24 Hegel: “The relation of both self-consciousnesses is in this way [through the struggle] so constituted that they prove themselves to each other through a life-and-death struggle.”
25 Hegel puts it this way (which Sartre would later take over): “the nature of self-consciousness” is “its being infinite, or directly the opposite of the determinateness in which it is fixed.” Hence, the need for mediation follows from the nature of self-consciousness: “Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or ‘recognized’ ” (Hegel).
26 My underscore.

Marla takes the wind out of the sails Jack has set up in bad faith. As he says: “With her there, I was a faker, too. Her lie reflected my lie. And all of a sudden, I felt nothing. With her there, I couldn't cry.” She is
elsewhere for acknowledgment. We find a pertinent metaphor for this process in Hegel’s torturous, yet ultimately enlightening, parable of “Lordship and Bondage,” a story of self-consciousnesses whose need for Recognition leads to mutual struggle.

**The Struggle.** When the two meet, it is as if each “has lost its own self,” for it “sees itself in the other. It must cancel the other,” in order to affirm itself as independent and essential – as a being for itself, not for another, like a mere thing. Neither “regard[s] the other as essentially real.” In the ensuing struggle, “each aims at the destruction and death of the other,” while “risk[ing] its own life.” The emergent victor realizes the futility of annihilating the other, through whose mediation alone can the conquering self-consciousness get Recognition. So the other is allowed to live as the Master’s Servant, a slave, an object. In Hegel’s terms, the Master is “independent,” and its essential nature is to be for itself; the other is “dependent” and its essence is life or existence for another. The Servant, in working on the world – laboring – for the Master, “affirms itself as unessential,” and “cancels itself as self-existent, and ipso facto, itself does what the first does to it.”

**The Reversal.** The subjection of the Servant is supposed to achieve the Master’s independence and essentiality through the Servant’s Recognition. But, alas, the Master’s identity is now in effect dependent upon the Servant, upon “the fortuitous unessential action of that consciousness.” The Master is dependent for both Recognition and work, hence, is no longer an independent consciousness. Instead it is, in a sense, subject to the Servant. This turning of the tables was essential, says Hegel, due, as we’ll see, to the link between the identities of Master and Servant: the Master’s actions toward the Servant are, in a sense to be explored, actions toward itself.

Just as Lordship turned into the reverse of that at which it aimed, so, too, does an Other, reflecting back the wrong kind of acknowledgment. Jack discovers Fight Club, which fills him up more than the support groups ever did.

27 There are many levels on which the need for recognition gets played out in the film, including recognition from something like the Supreme Ruler: “God … hates you. This is not the worst thing that can happen. His hate is better that His indifference…. We are God's middle children, with no special place in history and no special attention. Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope of damnation or redemption.”

28 Hegel: “this action on the part of the second is the action proper of the first; for what is done by the bondsman is properly an action of the master…. But for recognition proper there is needed the moment that what the master does to the other he should also do to himself, and what the bondsman does to himself, he should do to the other also. On this account a form of recognition has arisen that is one-sided and unequal.”
Bondage. As it turns out, the Servant’s labor produced one of the preconditions of true freedom: In labor, as the Servant forms objects “into something that is permanent and remains” and has independence; its consciousness is “externalized and passes into the condition of permanence.” Hegel expresses this reversal in a typically opaque way: “being a consciousness repressed within itself, it will enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence.”

The second precondition, which better qualifies the Servant to assume the role of a true, independent self-consciousness, is fear, achieved in the actual fight “to the death.” Hegel says:

…. it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not … mere absorption in the expanse of life. … The individual, who has not staked his life, may … be recognized as a Person; but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness. …

Fear is thus required for profound, self-knowing freedom. And it is the Servant who meets this requirement better than the Master: The Servant was afraid for its entire being; it felt the fear of death … melted to its inmost soul … and all that was fixed … has quaked within it. This … dissolution of all its stability into fluent continuity, is, however, the simple, ultimate nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, pure self-referent existence. …

29 In labor, the Servant “cancels … attachment to natural existence,” even though still unaware of being self-existent – as yet, not fully self-conscious. The “bondman becomes … aware of himself as … objectively self-existent” thanks to consciousness of the work of its hands. Hegel:

in fashioning the thing, self-existence comes to be felt explicitly as his own proper being, and he attains the consciousness that he himself exists in its own right and on its own account…. Thus precisely in labor where there seemed to be merely some outsider’s mind and ideas involved, the bondsman becomes aware, through this re-discovery of himself by himself, of having himself, of having and being a “mind of his own.”

Interestingly, one of the activities that occupies a large chunk of Tyler’s (and later, the space monkeys’) time is making soap. Perhaps this labor plays this role. As Jack remarks: “Tyler sold the soap to department stores at twenty bucks a bar. God knows what they charged. How ironic. We were selling rich women their own fat asses back to them.” Indeed, on the Marxist level, this labor was not for the bourgeoisie, but for himself (see Marx 1844): here the wool is pulled over the oppressors’ eyes.

30 This is reminiscent not only of the first-last and greatest-least sayings of Jesus, but, pertinently, of Marx’s predicted rise of the proletariat, the oppressed who subdue the oppressors.
But to get Hegel right – and, I think, to understand the film – it’s important to see that the process does not end here. The higher synthesis, which I mentioned earlier, comes, in Hegel’s parable, after this dialectical struggle, when the self-consciousnesses recognize that the only real resolution of the conflict is in mutual Recognition and respect, rather than in domination. We’ll see how this is played out in the film.

The relation between fear for life and authentic freedom expressed in the parable surfaces in the film time and again. As Marla emphasizes, “Dying people are so alive.” Without “absolute fear,” we have – in Hegel’s words – only “an attitude that does not get beyond the attitude of bondage,” since “it is still inherently a determinate mode of being,” like that of a thing, rather than of a Person. (This is the germ of what would grow, in the thought of Sartre, into an analysis of bad faith.)

Indeed, from this point of view, imposing this fear for life on others is seen to be the act of a liberator. Tyler forces Jack to high speed in a stolen car, which Jack’s employer released, even though “the front seat mounting bracket never passed collision tests.” Before the (rollover?) accident Tyler admonishes Jack, “ONLY AFTER YOU’VE LOST EVERYTHING ARE YOU FREE TO DO ANYTHING!” The crash produces that “dissolution of stability” which is pre-requisite to freedom.

But this action plays a double-role; it also produces empathy, which Jack needed in order to overcome one of his specific ways of objectifying others, namely, his habitual, mathematical objectification of crash victims, as an actuary. The crash peels away more layers of capitalist veneer, still tainting Jack’s view of the world. He narrates: “I’d never been in a car accident. This was what all those statistics felt like before I wrote them into my reports.” This empathy helps make possible the kind of mutual recognition and respect achieved by the self-consciousnesses in Hegel’s parable, who transcend the categories of Master and Slave.

31 This is the basis of Hegel’s defense of a kind of Kantian Categorical Imperative, a return to thank the root that nourished all of these branches.
32 It will turn out that Fight Club does not glorify violence, but portrays it ultimately as a desperate, and ultimately abandoned, method of coping with alienation.
33 In another case, Tyler forces the proverbial store clerk to his knees, with a gun to his head, and, after reducing him to tears in fear, gives him a “carpe deum” admonishing and sends him on his way – after which, Tyler mutters: “tomorrow will be the most beautiful day of your life. Your breakfast is going to taste better than any meal you’ve ever eaten.”
V. What's Wrong With the Anti-Thesis? (madness)

Fight Club grows into so-called “Project Mayhem,” which launches large-scale, organized vandalistic attacks on the oppressive powers that be. Jack ultimately sees in this development that the reactionary categories that define Fight Club foster a form of disposability that parallels the rejected capitalist madness. Although Jack complains about corporate power to establish labels, to name, the troops that carry out Project Mayhem are nameless, interchangeable parts of a larger organism, which has unified itself (under the guidance of Tyler) against The Oppressive Establishment. But Jack’s misgivings about this namelessness are just part of the critique of Project Mayhem.

The satisfaction provided by Fight Club is unstable for at least two reasons, the first of which can be overcome. It is that the sporadic episodes of fulfillment leave members living two lives: Jack narrates, “Who you were in fight club is not who you were in the rest of your world. You weren't alive anywhere like you were alive at fight club. But fight club only exists in the hours between when fight club starts and when fight club ends.”

This kind of dual life for members may be unavoidable, as long as Fight Club is a club, which, qua club, is not mainstreamed.

The second reason is ineliminable, in the sense that overcoming the just-mentioned duality requires mainstreaming the counter-values honored at Fight Club, which, in turn, requires a full-scale reversion to an existence like that of Rousseau’s savage – a harsh life in a world void of comforts and amenities. As surely as something terrible grows

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34 Jack: “When deep space exploitation ramps up, it will be corporations that name everything. The IBM Stellar Sphere. The Philip Morris Galaxy. Planet Starbucks.”

35 Ricky, a Fight Clubber: “in Project Mayhem, we have no names.” Uniformity breeds interchangeability: everyone dresses, shaves, and takes orders alike. As Tyler says about the first trainee: “A monkey, ready to be shot up into space, ready to sacrifice himself for Project Mayhem.” The statement the lot of space monkeys recite: “You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everything else. We are all part of the same compost pile.” Jack later described his experience on the premises: “I had to hug the walls, being a mouse trapped inside this clockwork of space monkeys, cooking and working and sleeping in teams. The house became a living thing, wet on the inside from so many people sweating and breathing. So many people moving, the house moved.” It was like the fascist “organism,” “Planet Tyler.”

When Jack declares Bob, a kind of Martyr for Mayhem, to have a name, the space monkeys embrace it. Although it looks here as if Recognition of individuality is compatible with Project Mayhem, the momentum required to sustain the organization against the opposition submerges everyone into a sea of namelessness again.

36 As long as Fight Clubbers define themselves as against the Other, their being – like that of Hegel’s first consciousness – is parasitically defined as what it is with respect to an Other.

37 The logical culmination of an outlook that takes seriously the kind of counter-values glorified in Fight Club...
secretly within capitalism, this counter-movement would lead to an equally dreadful social disaster.

VI. Killing Tyler: The Higher Synthesis Achieved

The final twist in the interpretation, of both the parable and the film, is that the supposed two self-consciousnesses are one! The second self was not independent “in the beginning” at all (that was only the appearance); it was a mere objectification of the first. As Hegel put it: “Self-consciousness … [had] come outside itself.” The struggle between Tyler and Jack, and between the two self-consciousnesses in the parable, each transpire within one self. Not that there wasn’t foreshadowing of this in the film. But nowhere is it more prominent than in the film’s pen-ultimate scene, in which Jack acquires a gun “from Tyler” in their final fight.

When Jack first points the gun at Tyler, his Other, and shoots, the bullets pass right through. Tyler senses the climaxing, do-or-die tension, the ripening conditions for an act of transcendence that will leave him behind. So he offers, as a concession, a new unity: “No more running off without you. From here on out, we do it together.” But he warns: “If I leave, you will be right back where I found you.” Jack’s response: “I swear on my life, I won’t.” On his life, indeed, as his life-threatening decision attests. He looks at

Club implies the following possible future, held out by Project Mayhem:

The world I see -- you're stalking elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. You wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life. You climb the wrist-thick vines that wrap the Sears Tower. You see tiny figures pounding corn and laying strips of venison on the empty car pool lane of the ruins of a superhighway. (Tyler)

38 Jack, about his boss: “Under and behind and inside everything this man took for granted, something horrible had been growing.” As Jack narrates later, just before blowing up about Bob’s death: “Under and behind and inside everything I took for granted, something horrible had been growing.”

39 Recall Tyler’s unsuccessful “attempts” to kill Jack – he gave instructions to have Jack emasculated if he tried to call off Project Mayhem.

40 The corresponding moment of realization in the film:

JACK: “Why do people think I'm you?” TYLER: “Because we happen to share the same body.”
JACK: “What the hell are you talking about?” TYLER: “Sometimes I control it and you imagine watching me.” …JACK: “But we fought!” TYLER: “When you're controlling the body, you see me and hear me. But no one else does…..” JACK: “You're a projection? A personality disorder? A psychogenic fugue state?” TYLER: “Fuck that. You're my hallucination” [JACK points to his body].

41 E.g., the case of the lye burn on Jack/Tyler’s hand.
42 My underscore.
the gun and brings it up – as he tells Tyler – to “our mouth.” He says, “My eyes are open,” and squeezes the trigger, thus blowing a hole out the back of Tyler’s head, and apparently sparing Jack. We see the birth of a new self-knowledge here: Jack knows, that, paradoxically, for self-consciousness and its Other, an action “is the act of the one as well as of the other.”

This is the moment of transcendence, passage to the higher synthesis. First, notice that here we see the fear, rooted in the risk of one’s life, that enables one to truly live. Second, we are left with one, a unity, as self-consciousness desires. One might now legitimately wonder how this could be the unification of Jack and Tyler, and at the same time why the wound would not have killed both of them. Perhaps it did, in the right sense. As Hegel’s dialectic goes, both thesis and anti-thesis are negated by the synthesis. Paradoxically, both are also affirmed (or “live on”) in it. Not only is Tyler qua Tyler killed; so is Jack qua Jack. Both are comprehended in a higher synthesis, maybe a kind of Nietzschean Superman. In this last scene, we see Jack’s physique on the new Tyler; but when he takes Marla’s hand, he produces what the script calls a “Tyler-esque grin.”

None of this is to deny the simultaneously Marxist interpretation of the film at the social level. There is plenty of turning Hegel on his head going on: Those who carry out Project Mayhem are practically identified with the proletariat, Marx’s Slaves in whom self-consciousness rises; the capitalists, or bourgeoisie, are the dependent Masters. This is even reflected in Jack’s haiku: “Worker bees can leave Even drones can fly away The

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43 Tyler, just prior to Jack’s pull of the trigger: “So, what are you going to do? You don't even have the guts to make a decision.”
44 Jack points the barrel not toward the externalization, but at himself; he owns this action. As a last resort, Tyler calls Jack “IKEA-boy,” reminding him of the blindness brought on by the categories from which he’s been delivered.
45 Immediately after the “death” scene, Tyler’s body is gone.
46 Jack here demonstrates his ability to “[dissolve] all … stability into fluent continuity,” which Hegel claimed is a precursor to true, unified, self-knowing freedom.
47 Marx famously turned Hegel “on his head” by converting what in Hegel is a tension within the subject, between concepts into tension in the social world (within the relations of production) between classes. The bourgeoisie are personified as Master and the proletariat as Slave. The ultimate categories in terms of which the flux of the manifold of history is to be interpreted are economic, and the ones in terms of which individuals conceive of themselves and others are derived from these.
48 As Tyler threatens the Police Commissioner, he warns against counteracting Project Mayhem: “The people you're after are everyone you depend on. We're the people who do your laundry and cook your food and serve your dinner. We guard you while you sleep. We drive the ambulances. We process your insurance claims. We control every part of your life.” In effect, the Slave turns the table on the Master. In extorting a salary from his boss, Jack expresses this turning of the tables in which the exploited exploits the exploiter, the Slave the Master.
queen is their slave.” It’s just that the film, like Hegel, deals simultaneously with these conflicts in the social world, and analogous conflicts featured in the individual self-consciousness. So although Marx gets turned on his head, too (which is only fair), it is no accident that in the final scene, in which the individual self-consciousness achieves a higher synthesis, we also witness the destruction of a major city’s financial district, a sign of something like the Marxist abolition of property which accompanies social harmony. Hence, there is a Platonic twist to the interpretation of the parable: the struggles of the state parallel those of the individual soul (cf. Kelly 1977: 177).

The new Tyler sees the idea that one has to struggle, or fight, for recognition as the result of alienation. The self cultivated in Fight Club is not “the” authentic self, even if it constitutes a (necessary?) step in the direction of freedom. In a fashion parallel to that displayed in the dialectic of Master and Slave, I suggest that Jack here breaks free of oppressive categories and authentically adopts an attitude of respect and Recognition toward self and others.

Granted Fight Club ends before my interpretation is in the bag. Am I right? If we are allowed to take a clue from the background provided by Hegel’s parable and his view of progress toward unification; and from Marx’s communist apocalypse, in which all alienation is overcome; and from Nietzsche’s Superman, a being whose self-definition is positive, and not parasitic, then, yes. Something like my view has to be right. Fight Club is optimistic: it is a journey from awareness of alienation and a reactionary posture to a transcendent one, which leaves the negative behind.

49 More, we see here a third level of interpretation, alluded to in fn. 6. We see a kind of “class struggle” played out on the subjective field of our protagonist’s mind. As Jack-the-actuary, he identifies with the bourgeoisie; as Tyler, he rejects capitalist values, identifying himself with the self-conscious proletariat. Hegel recognized this.

50 My assumption is that now Jack sees himself as both subject and object of — receiver and giver of — Recognition. In turn, he not only views himself, but Marla, with respect, as not disposable.

51 Nietzsche’s borrowing of Hegel’s Master-Slave terminology invites comparison. It would appear that Nietzsche’s identification of the hero is with the Master who keeps down the Slave. But it seems most consistent to hold that Nietzsche’s Superman will be whoever is able to reject un-chosen values; and since it is neither Slave nor Master, but the synthetic result of the dialectic that produces such a being, this would seem to be the best nominee. It should not be the empowered “Slave”: as we’ve seen, the reactionary is not overflowing with positive power, like the Superman, but parasitically defines itself by contrast.

52 However, the introduction of Nietzsche in our list brings a final question to mind — to which I have not worked out an answer: Is the film ultimately about overcoming alienation through individualistic autonomy (a very modernist vision)? Becoming (on one interpretation) Nietzsche’s Superman. Or is it about overcoming alienation in a community that casts off conceptual and economic oppression? Becoming Marx’s creative, productive, social human. The film seems to suggest a certain pessimism about the latter,
In a clip from the film’s trailer, Tyler asks, “How much can you really know about yourself if you never go at it, one-on-one?” Now, this query seems closer in spirit to the ancient adage, adopted by Socrates, “Know Thyself,” than to the kind of troubled, testosterone-driven adolescent behavior many of the film’s critics see it for.

References

*Fight Club* (1999), a screenplay by Jim Uhls, directed by David Fincher, and based on a novel by Chuck Palahniuk; Fox. (Script available at [http://www.crosswinds.net/~filmhouse/scripts/fight_club.html](http://www.crosswinds.net/~filmhouse/scripts/fight_club.html))

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1807), *Phenomenology of Mind*, J.B. Baillie’s 1910 translation.


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in its negative portrayal of both consumerism and the counter-movement. But perhaps the film is properly about neither.