

Michael Celli

Professor Kearney

Strangers, Gods, and Monsters

Final Paper

“Fight Club” and the friendship of Tyler Dyrden

The movie “Fight Club” begins with its narrator, also the main character, engaging the audience in an act of narrative memory as he recalls how he became friends with Tyler Dyrden. Dyrden is introduced as a man played by actor Brad Pitt and the narrator, unnamed until the end, is played by actor Edward Norton. By the end of the movie it is revealed that both the narrator, Norton, and Brad Pitt are in fact Tyler Dyrden. The man played by Brad Pitt was supposedly a creation of Norton’s psychosis, Norton’s alter ego who came alive while Norton slept. Pitt is introduced to Norton as a stranger he meets on the plane. Norton then continues the relationship in an act of diacritical friendship that eventually leads him to the realization of the true identity of Pitt, the Other. Norton realizes that the Other, Pitt, who takes on the roles the stranger, the god, and the monster throughout the narration. Throughout the movie, in the narrative memory of Norton the audience must judge Pitt in order to know what to think of him. Was he Norton’s alter ego, responsible for all the shameful desires that lurked in Norton’s brain? Was he a demon that possessed the poor office clerk? Or was he a Christ figure, sacrificing himself so that Norton could have his sanity back? Norton’s narration takes the audience through all these possibilities and then ends the movie, enigmatically with the death, or murder of Pitt’s character, the

charismatic soap salesmen, as played by Brad Pitt is the malevolent repressed force of the real Dyrden's mind. In the end, and as a result of the friendship between Norton and Pitt, Norton judges the other.

Pitt identifies himself as the stranger that is truly not so strange at all in the scene when Norton realizes that he is Tyler Dyrden, saying "You need me, I am everything you want to be but can't. I am smarter than you, stronger than you, I even fuck better than you." This fits into Freud's notion of the *unheimlich* as it was discussed in Kristeva's book, *Strangers to Ourselves*. Pitt represents everything that Norton cannot be, everything that, in his society, he cannot live with. Norton lives in a 'cement cubicle,' Pitt lives in a house in the middle of an industrial park. Norton works as an office employee for a large car company, applying a dehumanizing formula for car accidents while Pitt inserts penises into children's films at theatres where he does projectionist work, Pitt urinates in the soups of the dining hall he caters in while Norton waits for connecting flights to LAX and SeaTAC, his life 'ticking away one moment at a time.' *Unheimlich* is a term used to denote what is secret and hidden, but for some reason has come back to the surface (183). The "uncanny strangeness" attributed to the *unheimlich* points back to a past that has become inadequate for survival and yet is essential to the survival of the unconscious. Kristeva writes of the other as the double, saying, "Freud noted that the archaic narcissistic self, not yet demarcated by the outside world, projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien *double*, uncanny and demoniacal" (183).

Before Norton had met Pitt, he had living the typical lifestyle of men his age. He had a job and an apartment with lots of nice furniture, he was a victim of the 'IKEA nesting instinct' as he describes in the narrative. This was his safe life, his 'single serving' life. An existence of pre-packaged, ready made meals and relationships; everything is planned out and perfectly logical, no surprises. Then his apartment explodes, blowing his whole life, as he was collecting it through his shopping catalogues, to little neat flaming bits. How does this happen? The narration describes it as a suspicious accident, the pilot light goes out on the stove filling the whole apartment, over the course of weeks, with gas. Then once the refrigerator clicks on the whole apartment goes up. The audience learns later that someone had purposely blown up the apartment and, it is implied later, that it was Pitt. Again the audience witnesses through the narrative memory of Norton, after he has realized he and Pitt are the same person, his need to have someone save him, to create another person to do what he could not. Norton as the middle class, IKEA shopping, white collar slave, could not make the leap out the materialist society he lived in and blow it all to bits; but Pitt could. Pitt was reckless, fearless, and determined. He was everything that Norton was not.

Kristeva describes the relationship of the *unheimlich* and the *heimlich*, saying, "the psychic apparatus represses representative processes and contents that are no longer necessary for pleasure, self-preservation, and the adaptive growth of the speaking subject and the living organism...however, the repressed 'that ought to have remained secret,' shows up again and produces a feeling of uncanny strangeness" (184). It was this same feeling that came over Norton as he

beat himself up in his boss's room, that is what connects Pitt to Norton. Pitt is what has been forgotten in man, the primal need for violence, pain, and unrestrained sex. He wants to create his own world where his needs become necessary for survival again. The aspect of a figure re-emerging through time to make itself known to man is also seen in the mythical monster Typhon. A dragon, Typhon was a symbol of the pathos, the wild forces of nature, untamable, terrible and beautiful at once. Socrates, one of the prime figures of reason and intellect, in his discussion on his relation to the mythical, exemplified by Typhon, shows the struggle of logos to reconcile itself with pathos. This same fight echoes in Norton and Pitt's friendship. Pitt comes into Norton's life, bringing the ideas of primitive survival that have become obsolete and yet it is through Pitt's intervention in Norton's life that he faces his fear of death. Through Pitt's primitiveness he empowers Norton to become a living individual among a society of dead people.

Pitt, as pathos, takes over Norton's life through what society calls narcolepsy. Narcolepsy, an illness identified and treated with reason, is, in Norton's case, really the workings of the illogical, an invasion on the mind of Norton from a stranger. Norton is vaguely aware of this, telling his doctor, "I pass out and wake up in strange places, I don't remember how I got there." Pitt's intrusions into Norton's life act as reminders that he is not all reason, that not everything can be explained in a reasonable, safe, and supportive manner. Norton does not fear Pitt, he does not alienate the stranger but rather embraces the differences. Their friendship, until the very end of the movie is diacritical. Each

one is open to the others difference. It is the very differences between the two that cause Norton's life; his evolution as a fearful creature hiding within a materialist world, to a strong warrior, freed from the trappings of modern day society.

What began their friendship was an exploration into the unknown; neither of the men had been in a fight. This was the first fear that they faced. One of the main purposes of having a Fight Club was so that men could find out what fighting was like, what it was like to hit a man and be hit in turn. Fight Club was about facing your fears and recognizing that there was nothing there except you and your fear, like a child looking under his bed for the monster and then not seeing anything. Eventually this examining of fears led to the most primal fear of all, the fear of death. In this scene Pitt gives Norton a chemical burn on his hand. As the chemical is burning away his flesh Pitt uses this moment to impress upon Norton the reality of the moment, the value of real-time. Norton tries to use the meditation practices he had learnt in the support group for bone cancer to try to hide from the pain. Pitt forces him to be in the moment and experience the pain for what it is, a sign of his mortality. Pitt acts as a scapegoat for Norton throughout the film, taking on all of the traits that Norton is ashamed to have and afraid to act out. In doing this he creates Fight Club, forcing Norton to face his fears with Pitt's encouragement, i.e. the chemical burn, fighting, and self-abuse. Norton will face his fear of death one more final time, this will be the definitive moment in their friendship because it shows Pitt's true purpose as a stranger and as another self in terms of Norton's diacritical relationship.

The fear of death is the most basic fear to all human beings, as the unheimlich and as the embraced stranger of Norton, Pitt, was a means to force Norton to confront his fears. He became an embodiment of everything he feared and because he did not alienate but embraced him in a diacritical manner, Norton was forced to face his fear and hide behind it in a fear of the alien. Norton's second time facing his fear of death is the one of the last scenes of the movie, when he shoots himself in the face, a very clear attempt at suicide. Pitt is clearly the stronger of the two. In the previous scenes Pitt had been easily defeating Norton's attacks. He is, in fact, the smarter, faster, and stronger, of the two. Why then does he allow Norton to grab the pistol and threaten to kill himself thereby killing the both of them? The answer is the same one Pitt has been giving the whole movie, to free him. The premise for Fight Club was to free yourself from your fears, and the only way to free yourself from your fears was to face your fears. Therefore since the most basic fear, the one that enslaves us all is the fear of death, it is this fear that must be faced. For Norton to become completely free he must face death and the only way to do this was a serious attempt at suicide. Only then did he prove to himself that he was a mortal being, and only then, once the fear was conquered did the stranger, Pitt, disappear. The chemical burn was just a beginning, like Fight Club they were a means to introduce people into a way to encounter their fears and free themselves. All the acts of Fight Club and Project Mayhem eventually led up to the individual facing his own fear of death. This is the grand plan of Tyler Dyrden, to free all society from their fears. He

attempts this through the destruction of the credit unions. This will bring everyone back to zero, a new beginning for all.

This new beginning seems like much more of a symbolic beginning than a real attempt at massive social change, being that Pitt had planned to lead Norton to the building where they would watch all the buildings fall and planned to have the face off. Everything Norton knows, Pitt knows as well. In the beginning of the movie Norton describes the plans for the destruction of the credit unions, saying, "I know this because Tyler knows this." This new beginning is really a new beginning for Norton. This is the first moment when he claims his life as Tyler Dyrden. Rather than pointing to Pitt and saying I am me because I am not that, he embraced what he saw as otherness but what was in fact his inner fears projected outward. Here is an interesting alteration from the notion of the self knowing itself not by what it is but by what it is not. In the case of Tyler Dyrden. Norton was able to claim this self only through embracing a stranger as a friend, not an alien. He saw the other as what he was not but embraced that otherness, and in doing so claimed his own self.

After Norton faces his fear and Pitt disappears the audience is left with the true Tyler Dyrden. No longer does Norton need a *unheimlich*, or a scapegoat to carry his fears and evils for him. He has conquered them all and now the audience watches as the credit unions fall, one by one. The audience at this point experiences a kind of split vision, seeing both Pitt and Norton in the same body under the same identity they too must reconcile with the stranger now. The use of the narrator as the main character helped to achieve this challenge to the audience.

The audience must accept the narrator as a trustworthy friend, because he is the only one coming forward with any information. The audience sees the story through his eyes. But the narrators eyes are skewed and so is his storytelling. At the point the audience engages the story Norton has not yet confronted his fear of death the second time. The audience does not see Norton's real identity until he does, likewise when he claims his identity as Tyler Dyrden the audience must accept this new stranger the same way they accepted the narrator; for they are, it turns out, one and the same. This method of narrative deception is a means by which the story of an Other is told and heard by the audience and taken as the story of self. Because it was not told by a detached third person, this movie becomes the story of another self for the audience just as Pitt was another self for Norton. The story is told by the narrator not as himself but as someone who has not yet fully claimed his identity and is still in diacritical relationship with an other. How then is the story supposed to be taken by the audience?

This story can be taken the way many stories are, in the sense of catharsis. Richard Kearney in his book, On Stories, illuminates one function of storytelling, "Here narrative fiction draws from the first two functions while adding a supplementary one- that of cathartic survival. An example of this might be Joyce's narrative task of transmuting the everyday suffering into a sublimated work of art." In "Fight Club," the audience hears the story of a man trying to claim his identity not by alienating, or creating a scapegoat but by embracing what he does not recognize as himself. By showing this struggle to the audience they are confronted with an other themselves, and so must decide whether or not

to alienate, scapegoat, or embrace the Other, now Tyler Dyrden as played by Norton, before them.

Embracing the otherness of a stranger can bring the otherness within the self out and into open dialogue. In “Fight Club” a kind of social catharsis was created in that the fears of a whole society were put before them; mass destruction, disregard for material worth, embracing violence as a reality and not a peripheral fiction. The audience was made to judge, either they walked out saying ‘its movie’s like those, glorifying violence and objectification of women, those are the reasons we have so much crime today,’ scapegoating the film; or they walk away effected by it amazed that there were people on the screen doing and saying what they never knew they felt until that moment; thereby taking the movie as a self whose difference can add to their own knowledge of self. A judgement of the Other is imperative to engaging an open dialogue and coming to a conclusion something like what Norton experienced in the end of “Fight Club.” This was a movie that forced judgement upon its viewers making them aware at least of the fact that they were actively making a choice, and that, they were engaging in a dialogue with an Other.