

SECOND SELVES, SECOND STORIES: UNRELIABLE  
NARRATION AND THE CIRCULARITY OF READING IN  
FORD MADDOX FORD'S *THE GOOD SOLDIER* AND CHUCK  
PALAHNIUK'S / DAVID FINCHER'S *FIGHT CLUB*

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*The essay investigates how the *The Good Soldier* (1915) and *Fight Club* (1996), as well as the latter's film adaptation (1999), construct second selves of their autodiegetic narrators and thereby elicit second stories. In both novels, it is only toward the end of the narratives that readers realize the extent to which the narrator identifies with his close male friend who embodies his ideal of masculinity. With reference to the narratological concept of unreliability, the article explores how readers hence have to reassess their understanding of the narrated events and their value judgments. This belated recognition of the narrator's unreliability triggers a circular reading process, a structural device that self-consciously comments on the hermeneutic circle and that is mirrored by circular concepts of biography and history in the content of both novels.*

*The Good Soldier* (1915) and *Fight Club* (1996), two novels written and set a few years before eminent geopolitical events – respectively, the outbreak of the First World War and the terrorist attacks of September 2001 that provoked a ‘War on Terror’ – share a number of thematic concerns and formal characteristics. The shared issue that will interest me in the following is how the novels construct second selves of their autodiegetic narrators. While John Dowell, the narrating protagonist of *The Good Soldier*, increasingly identifies with his friend Edward Ashburnham to the point of regarding him as an alter ego, the unnamed protagonist of *Fight Club* realizes toward the end of his narrative that he suffers from a dissociative identity disorder, and that his close friend Tyler Durden is actually a part of himself. These second selves are related to the issue of circularity in two respects. On the one hand, they represent the protagonist's ego ideal and, in particular, his notion of ideal masculinity. The envisioned models of masculinity are closely linked to the social circumstances in the early and late twentieth century and hence show decisive differences, but in both novels they entail a fantasy of circular history. On the other hand, the fact that the narrators are unreliable and reveal important information only toward the ends of their narratives forces readers to elicit second stories from the texts – stories that do not fully agree with the narrative offered by the protagonists. In the case of *Fight Club*, but to a lesser degree also in the case of *The Good Soldier*, this second reading can begin only after the first reading has been completed. The novels thereby incite circular readings

that revisit crucial episodes of the narrative to consider them in a different light. Since the success and popularity of *Fight Club* stemmed to a large degree from its film adaptation of 1999, directed by David Fincher, I will also examine how the film portrays the protagonist's second self, how it adapts the novel's unreliable narration and how it triggers a circular viewing process. Before I enquire further into the relationship between second selves and second readings in *The Good Soldier* and *Fight Club*, I will in the following briefly assess the narratological theory of unreliability.

### The Concept of Unreliable Narration

The concept of unreliable narration was initially developed in the context of prose fiction, but in recent years it has found increasing attention in film studies, too. The narratological challenge of unreliable narration resides in the fact that the reader has to be given clues that render the narrator, on whose information and interpretation readers depend, untrustworthy. The agency in the text that can give such clues, narratologists have suggested, is the implied author: That is, the (beside the narrator) second, even higher authority that readers assume to be present and at work in a text. If readers can detect a distance between the implied author and the narrator – be it a moral, intellectual, physical, or temporal distance – and if the implied author indicates that the narrator is mistaken, unreliable narration occurs.<sup>1</sup> The notion of the implied author, however, is difficult to define. Seymour Chatman has called the implied author “the agency within the narrative fiction itself which guides any reading of it” and “the source of the narrative text's whole structure of meaning.” His broadest definition, “the text is itself the implied author,”<sup>2</sup> shows that recent attempts by structuralist and cognitive narratologists to conceptualize unreliable narration without the notion of the implied author by employing instead the alternative category of the ‘entire text’<sup>3</sup> are actually in accordance with Chatman's notion of a nonanthropomorphic implied author. Chatman calls this inferred instance also ‘text implication,’ ‘text instance,’ ‘text design,’ ‘text intent,’ and “a sense of purpose reconstructable from the text that

1 Cf. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995): 156.

2 Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1990): 74, 75, 81.

3 Cf., for example, Ansgar Nünning, “Unreliable Narration zur Einführung: Grundzüge zu einer kognitiv-narratologischen Theorie und Analyse unglaubwürdigen Erzählens,” in *Unreliable Narration: Studien zur Theorie und Praxis unglaubwürdigen Erzählens in der englischsprachigen Erzählliteratur*, ed. Ansgar Nünning, Carola Surkamp, and Bruno Zerweck (Trier: WVT, 1998): 3–40; and Bruno Zerweck, “Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction,” *Style* 35 (2001): 151–178.

we read.”<sup>4</sup> In a recent contribution to the debate, “Resurrection of the Implied Author,” Wayne C. Booth has conceptualized the implied author again in anthropomorphic terms. I prefer the more neutral models of Chatman and others, but Booth's rehabilitation is striking in the context of my present concern: He understands the implied author as the author's second self, which is assumed to be a superior form of the author<sup>5</sup> and “provides models for living better than would be provided by the authors' actual lives.”<sup>6</sup> According to Booth, authors “create a realer, truer, more genuine version of their selves,”<sup>7</sup> just as John Dowell understands Edward Ashburnham as his better self in *The Good Soldier* and just as the narrator of *Fight Club* invents an idealized alter ego, Tyler Durden. If we follow Booth's definition, readers of *Fight Club* and *The Good Soldier* are faced with the challenge, not only of interpreting the alter-ego relationship between the protagonist and the (imagined) friends, but also of discovering the position of the implied author as it can be inferred from the text and comparing it to the author's stance – a task to which I will return toward the end of this essay.

The debates regarding the implied author indicate that unreliable narration depends on the reader's sensitivity and activity: The reader herself must construct, or detect, the implied author; she has to gather and assemble the clues to the narrator's unreliability. Given this importance of the reader's response, narratologists have recently emphasized the use of frame theory in the examination of unreliable narration. According to this approach, the reader will assume the narrator's unreliability, since it is signaled in the text, but also if her extratextual frames collide with the text. For example, if the ethical values of narrator and reader are divergent, the reader might assume that the narrator is not trustworthy.<sup>8</sup> In this case, readers would doubt the validity of the narrator's evaluations rather than his reporting of facts or his interpreting of

4 Chatman, *Coming to Terms*, 86. In their recent contributions to *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), both Ansgar Nünning and Tamar Yacobi have reintroduced the implied author and even the actual author in their discussion of unreliable narration (see Ansgar F. Nünning, “Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration: Synthesizing Cognitive and Rhetorical Approaches,” 89–107, and Tamar Yacobi, “Authorial Rhetoric, Narratorial (Un)Reliability, Divergent Readings: Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*,” 108–123).

5 Wayne C. Booth, “Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother?” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005): 77–88, 85.

6 Booth, “Resurrection,” 78.

7 Booth, “Resurrection,” 85.

8 See Tamar Yacobi, “Fictional Reliability as a Communicative Problem,” *Poetics Today* 22 (1981): 113–126; Nünning, “Unreliable Narration,” 27ff.; and Gaby Allrath, “But why will you say that I am mad?: Textuelle Signale für die Ermittlung von *unreliable narration*,” in Nünning, Surkamp, and Zerweck, *Unreliable Narration*, 59–79.

events according to his (limited) knowledge and perception.<sup>9</sup> The concept of unreliable narration is of foremost importance for homodiegetic and, in particular, for autodiegetic narrators. Since authorial narrators are assumed to be omniscient, the category has proved to be scarcely helpful for their exploration; in the case of figural narratives, the concept of the fallible filter, that is, the untrustworthy focalizer, largely replaces the notion of unreliable narration, since the narrator in figural narratives remains too covert to be judged reliable.

Since the 1990s, unreliable narration has been a popular device in films such as *The Usual Suspects* (1995), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *Memento* (2000), *Donnie Darko* (2001), *The Others* (2001), *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *Spider* (2002), *Identity* (2003), *The Machinist* (2004), *Secret Window* (2004), and *The Prestige* (2006). The abundance of films that are told unreliably and invite circular readings indicates that the phenomenon is of broader cultural interest; it seems to reflect epistemological and ethical insecurities that are typical of a postmodern world without fully reliable and unequivocal master narratives. In the context of film studies, unreliable narration raises the foundational question as to who or what narrates a film – a question that has caused intense debate. Critics have offered a variety of competing terms to describe this narrating agency of a film, for instance, ‘camera,’ ‘image-maker,’ ‘intrinsic or fundamental narrator,’ and ‘perceptual pilot.’<sup>10</sup> The most straightforward equivalent to homodiegetic narration in a film is a (mostly retrospective) account by a character who comments on the action in a voice-over, thus functioning as narrator. Additionally, the use of a subjective camera can reinforce the audience’s impression that they are witnessing the shown events from the perspective of a character; here, the narratological concept of focalization applies. As I will discuss in the latter part of this article, David Fincher’s *Fight Club* makes extensive use of both ‘homodiegetic’ and ‘figural’ filmic devices, which indicate that the action is presented from the (unreliable) perspective of its nameless protagonist and narrator, played by Edward Norton. However, because audiences are used to the objective and reliable camerawork of mainstream films, *Fight Club* can nonetheless provide a surprise effect. Such a surprise effect grows into confusion and a sense of enigma in films that use neither voice-over nor a subjective camera, yet nonetheless render the narrative agency (which is usually considered a

9 See James Phelan and M. P. Martin, “‘The Lessons of Weymouth’: Homodiegesis, Unreliability, Ethics and *The Remains of the Day*,” in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. D. Hermann (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1999): 88–109.

10 See Julika Griem and Eckard Voigts-Virchow, “Filmnarratologie: Grundlagen, Tendenzen und Beispielanalysen,” in *Erzähltheorie transgenerisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär*, ed. Vera Nünning (Trier: WVT, 2002): 155–183, 161–162, for a concise summary of such positions.

neutral, reliable recorder of events) untrustworthy or even hallucinatory – as, for instance, David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* or *Mulholland Drive*.<sup>11</sup>

*The Good Soldier*: “I love him because he was just myself. If I had had the courage and the virility...”

Ford Madox Ford’s *The Good Soldier* is narrated by John Dowell, an American in his forties who reflects on the events of the prior decade in his life, during which he and his wife Florence developed an intense friendship with an English couple, Leonora and Edward Ashburnham, which eventually led to the suicides of both Florence and Edward and the mental collapse of Leonora’s ward, Nancy Rufford. The narrator tells these events retrospectively but not chronologically. As critics have noted, Ford wrote his novel according to the theory of narrative progression developed by Joseph Conrad and himself when they collaborated. They posited that a story must be carried forward faster and more intensely as it progresses: that a *progression d’effet* must take place.<sup>12</sup> In *The Good Soldier*, this *progression d’effet* includes the narrator’s accelerating piecing-together of causes and effects and his gradual recognition that his allegedly heartsick wife had been unfaithful to him with several men, including Edward Ashburnham. These belated recognitions mean that readers have to reconsider the told events in an act of actual or recollecting circular reading once they have realized that Dowell is not a fully reliable interpreter of events and characters.

Since *The Good Soldier* is written as an impressionist novel, “the ‘truth’ of his [Dowell’s] recollections is not sequential factualism but psychological impressionism leading to a comprehension of the past by the telescoping of events.”<sup>13</sup> Dowell tries to make sense of events that have overwhelmed him with the unexpectedness and meaninglessness of a trauma and hence obsessively has to go back to them: “Dowell tells his story as a puzzled man thinks – not in chronological order, but compulsively, going over the ground in circles, returning to crucial points.”<sup>14</sup> This (circular) narration is a form of psychic cleansing or soothing for him, as he tells his narratee: “Forgive my writing of

11 These films hence pose a challenge to theories of unreliable film narration. Cf. Eva Laass, “Krieg der Welten in Lynchville: *Mulholland Drive* und die Anwendungsmöglichkeiten und -grenzen des Konzepts narrativer Unzuverlässigkeit,” in *‘Camera doesn’t lie’: Spielarten erzählerischer Unzuverlässigkeit im Film*, ed. Jörg Helbig (Trier: WVT, 2006): 251–281. Cf. also Volker Ferenz, “Fight Clubs, American Psychos and Mementos,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 3.2 (2005): 133–160.

12 Charles G. Hoffmann, *Ford Madox Ford* (Boston: Twayne, 1990): 47.

13 Hoffmann, *Ford*, 51.

14 Samuel Hynes, “The Epistemology of *The Good Soldier*,” in *Critical Essays on Ford Madox Ford*, ed. Richard A. Cassell (Boston: Hall, 1987): 49–56, 53.

these monstrous things in this frivolous manner. If I did not I should break down and cry."<sup>15</sup> He imagines the most protected and relaxing atmosphere possible for his narrative therapy, a country cottage at the coast, where he sits by a fireplace and tells "this thing" that needs to be transformed into a story to "a sympathetic soul opposite me" (GS, 17).<sup>16</sup> This scenario in effect imagines the narratee as a therapist. Consequently, Dowell suffers from the narratee's lack of response and support: "Is all this digression or isn't it digression? Again I don't know. You, the listener, sit opposite me. But you are so silent. You don't tell me anything" (GS, 19). It is part of Dowell's unreliability, however, that he at times dissembles this narrative situation and his deep emotional involvement in the story. For example, he maintains: "I don't know that analysis of my own psychology matters at all to the story" (GS, 123).

Dowell's traumatized repetition compulsion not only is registered on the level of discourse (that is, his nonchronological recollection of events) but also affects the chronological story time: In *The Good Soldier*, time unfolds not in a linear, progressive manner, but in a circular, or, rather, spiral form. The narration repeatedly culminates on the date of August 4, which assumes a recurrent fatal significance throughout the depicted time span: It is, among other events, the day of Florence's and John's marriage, the death date of Maisie Maidan, a former lover of Edward, and both the birth and death date of Florence (GS, 91).

As these events are all told retrospectively, after the deaths of Florence and Edward, the narrator's ignorance and innocence is, of course, a pose he assumes in order to let readers participate in his former delusions. Dowell as narrator seeks to recapture the attitudes of Dowell as protagonist. In narratological as much as epistemic and psychological terms, Dowell is hence a split personality. Yet, Dowell's unreliability does not come as an absolute surprise to readers. On the contrary, it is hinted at and even acknowledged by Dowell himself throughout the narrative. For instance, he describes his story as a maze, and acknowledges that he has forgotten aspects and uses three points of view, namely, Leonora's, Edward's, and his own (GS, 213). Toward the end of the

15 Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion*, ed. Thomas C. Moser (Oxford: OUP, 1990) 71; further references in the text abbreviated as "GS."

16 The process of therapeutic writing takes more than six months, which partly explains the changes in the narrator's attitude: "I have been writing away at this story now for six months and reflecting longer and longer upon these affairs" (GS, 214). Cf. Miriam Bailin, "An Extraordinarily Safe Castle': Aesthetics as Refuge in *The Good Soldier*," in Cassell, *Critical Essays on Ford*, 68–81, who shows how Dowell uses "aesthetic form to control and shape the raw material of experience and neutralize threatening emotions" (74). Cf. also Kenneth Womack, "'It is All a Darkness': Death, Narrative Therapy, and Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 38.3 (2002): 316–333, who offers an explicitly psychological reading of the novel.

narrative, he repeats "I don't know" (GS, 282ff.) several times and withdraws from all judgment: "I don't know. I know nothing. I am very tired. [...] I leave it to you. [...] I can't make out which of them was right. I leave it to you" (GS, 283–284). The sources of Dowell's unreliability and his "nervousness in the presence of knowledge"<sup>17</sup> are manifold. As an American, he is an outsider to the English society and manners that he depicts. Because of his lack of experience, he knows little about human psychology, about sexuality, even about religion: "I am only an ageing American with very little knowledge of life" (GS, 281); "I know nothing – nothing in the world – of the hearts of men" (GS, 11); "Of the question of the sex-instinct I know very little" (GS, 135). Therefore, Dowell is an inept narrator for a story that is subtitled *A Tale of Passion*, indicating both sexual desire and (martyred) suffering.<sup>18</sup> Problematically, he considers everything that he does not fully understand as irrelevant rather than taking the opportunity to expand his horizon. This recoiling from delicate matters is partly motivated by his task of protecting Florence's allegedly weak heart from exciting issues; he attempts to silence all references to love, poverty, crime, and religion, thus in effect censoring the narrative.<sup>19</sup> A further aspect of his unreliability is the fact that the sources of his reports of events he did not witness, including the most private thoughts of other characters, are sometimes unclear. The pose of the Victorian omniscient narrator that he assumes toward the end of the story is thus highly suspect.<sup>20</sup>

As already indicated, Dowell's frequent self-contradictions are another source of his unreliability. By far the most fascinating (and most pervasive) of these contradictions are his views of Edward Ashburnham, his friend and his wife's lover. Initially, Dowell cannot understand Edward's impact on women:

Good God, what did they all see in him; for I swear that was all there was of him, inside and out; though they said he was a good soldier. Yet, Leonora adored him with a passion that was like agony, and hated him with an agony that was as bitter as the sea. How could he rouse anything like a sentiment, in anybody?  
(GS, 33)

17 Denis Donoghue, "Listening to the Saddest Story," in *The Presence of Ford Madox Ford: A Memorial Volume of Essays, Poems, and Memoirs*, ed. Sondra J. Stang (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1981): 44–54, 45.

18 Cf. Mark Schorer, "*The Good Soldier*: An Interpretation," in Cassell, *Critical Essays on Ford*, 44–49, 45; and Hynes, "The Epistemology," 51.

19 Carol Jacobs, *Telling Time: Lévi-Strauss, Ford, Lessing, Benjamin, de Man, Wordsworth, Rilke* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993): 83.

20 Cf. John Skinner, "Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*: A Narratological *cas limite*," *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 19.3 (1989): 287–299.

Later in his narrative, however, his opinion of Edward has changed drastically, a transformation that is brought about by the advent of Nancy Rufford, whose love and admiration for Edward alters Dowell's view of him:

Edward Ashburnham was worth having. Have I conveyed to you the splendid fellow that he was – the fine soldier, the excellent landlord, the extraordinarily kind, careful and industrious magistrate, the upright, honest, fair-dealing, air-thinking, public character? (GS, 108)

Even after learning of Edward's and Florence's affair, Dowell clings to his positive notion of the friend: "It is impossible of me to think of Edward Ashburnham as anything but straight, upward and honorable. That, I mean, is, in spite of everything, my permanent view of him" (GS, 133–134). As part of his idealization and exculpation of Edward, Dowell increasingly distances himself from the women in their environment, whom he perceives as the sources of all evil and even as torturers of Edward. In a bizarre scenario, the moral and psychic torment allegedly exerted by women is turned into a scene of physical torture:

Those two women pursued that poor devil [Edward] and flayed the skin off him as if they had done it with whips. I tell you his mind bled almost visibly. I seem to see him stand, naked to the waist, his forearms shielding his eyes, and flesh hanging from him in rags. (GS, 274–275)<sup>21</sup>

This description of the injured, naked male torso and the staging of the protagonist as martyr resemble the descriptions of maimed male bodies in Palahniuk's novel and their visualization in Fincher's film adaptation. As critics of *Fight Club* have noted, ideal masculinity is achieved via masochistically coded (self-)harm in both novel and film.<sup>22</sup>

21 Cf. Karen A. Hoffmann, "Am I no better than a eunuch?": Narrating Masculinity and Empire in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, *Journal of Modern Literature* 27.3 (2003): 30–46.

22 See Nicola Rehling, "Fight Club Takes a Beating: Masculinity, Masochism and the Politics of Disavowal," *Gramma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 9 (2001): 187–205; see also Krister Friday, "A Generation of Men Without History? *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom," *Postmodern Culture* 13.3 (2003), <<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.503/13.3friday.txt>> [April 22, 2008]; and Lynn Ta, "Hurt So Good: *Fight Club*, Masculine Violence, and the Crisis of Capitalism," *Journal of American Culture* 29.3 (2006): 265–277.

In *The Good Soldier*, the narrator's idealization of Edward is linked to his increasing desire to be like Edward, who becomes an image of perfect masculinity for Dowell. Dowell perceives himself as unmanly, deficient and effeminate. He characterizes himself as a caricature of impotence incarnate: "I was just a male sick nurse" (GS, 81), an "old maid" (GS, 144), "twelve years of playing the trained poodle" (GS, 141); Leonora "looked at me as if I were an invalid" (GS, 40). Initially, he is taken aback by Edward's virility and sexual aggressiveness, compared to which he feels emasculated:

Am I no better than a eunuch or is the proper man – the man with the right to existence – a raging stallion forever neighing after his neighbor's womankind? I don't know – And there is nothing to guide us. And if everything is so nebulous about a matter so elementary as the morals of sex, what is there to guide us in the more subtle morality of all other personal contacts, associations, and activities? Or are we meant to act on impulse alone? It is all darkness. (GS, 16)

Here, Dowell still believes in the repression or sublimation of "impulse" for the sake of civilization, but soon he acknowledges the creative force of such impulsive behavior and blames society for its repressive attitude. Toward the end of the story, after Edward's death, Dowell identifies so strongly with Edward that he becomes his alter ego:

I seem to perceive myself following the lines of Edward Ashburnham. I suppose that I should really like to be a polygamist; [...] I am no doubt like every other man; only, probably because of my American origin I am fainter. (GS, 272)

For I can't conceal from myself the fact that I loved Edward Ashburnham – and that I love him because he was just myself. If I had had the courage and the virility and possibly also the physique of Edward Ashburnham I should, I fancy, have done much what he did. He seems to me like a larger elder brother who took me out on several excursions and did many dashing things, whilst I just watched him robbing the orchards, from a distance. And, you see, I am just as much of a sentimentalist as he was. (GS, 291)

While Dowell at first realizes his own promiscuous sexual desire but still perceives himself as "fainter," he ultimately sees Edward not merely as like himself, but as himself ("he was just myself"). Here, he seems to take up an

earlier remark about perfect love, which now no longer applies to heterosexual bonding, but to homosexual, or at least homosocial, bonding:

But the real fierceness of desire, the real heat of a passion long continued and withering up the soul of a man is the craving for identity with the woman that he loves. He desires to see with the same eyes, to touch with the same sense of touch, to hear with the same ears, to lose his identity, to be enveloped, to be supported. (GS, 135)

Dowell's love for Edward makes him desire the merging of their identities and he seems to do so to a larger degree by far than any heterosexual couple portrayed in the novel. His above-quoted vision of what he could have done with the looks and bravery of Edward posits the friend as his idealized *doppelgänger*.<sup>23</sup> An intertextual allusion shows that the description of Edward as 'good soldier,' which eventually gave the novel its ironic title, is also linked to this alter ego constellation. As Mark Schorer notes, Ford presented his novel as an English version of Maupassant's *Fort comme la mort* (1889). One of the characters in this novel is described as "an old intellectual who might have been, perhaps, a good soldier, and who could never console himself for what he had not been."<sup>24</sup> Dowell's vision of his alternative identity as the good soldier Edward is equally improbable, and Dowell suffers likewise from the lack of such an adventurous life. As we will see, these fantasies are very similar to the *doppelgänger* constellation in *Fight Club*, in which Tyler Durden suitably undertakes, as quoted above, "several excursions" and does "many dashing things," while the narrator does not take the responsibility but watches "from a distance." Likewise, Tyler is presented as the narrator's masculine ideal self, including sexual prowess:

I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not.<sup>25</sup>

23 Arthur Mizener in *The Saddest Story: A Biography of Ford Madox Ford* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1971) assumes a similar *alter ego*-relationship between Ford Madox Ford and Edward Ashburnham. He suggests that Edward is Ford's "hallucinated," "passionately sympathetic, idealized conception of himself. [...] Many of the things that Edward does Ford only dreamed of doing or imagined he had done [...]. [T]he conception of Edward's self is an exact representation of Ford's conception of himself" (263).

24 Qtd. in Schorer, "The Good Soldier," 47.

25 Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 2006): 174; further references in the text abbreviated as "FC."

In the coarser language of the film version of *Fight Club*, Tyler maintains: "All the ways you wish you could be, that's me. I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck. I am smart, capable, and, most importantly, I'm free in all the ways that you are not."<sup>26</sup>

Similar to *Fight Club*, women function as an object of exchange between the male alter ego figures in *The Good Soldier* and thereby strengthen the relationship between the men. Ironically, in both novels the exchanges mean that the protagonist hands over his female friend / wife before he himself has had sexual relations with her. Thus, Tyler seems to steal Marla from the protagonist and Edward has an affair with Florence, with whom Dowell never consummated the marriage. Once Edward is dead, Dowell attempts to retaliate: He means to marry Nancy, whom Edward desired to the point of self-annihilation. Interestingly, however, this plan does not stem from his conscious self, but from what seems to be Edward's voice within Dowell, that is, the lost and incorporated alter ego. When Leonora reminds Dowell of his plan to marry Nancy, he maintains:

I never had the slightest conscious idea of marrying the girl; I never had the slightest idea even of caring for her. I must have talked in an odd way, as people do who are recovering from an anaesthetic. It is as if one had a dual personality, the one thing being entirely unconscious of the other. I had thought nothing; I had said such an extraordinary thing. (GS, 123)

Once again, this psychic split resembles that of *Fight Club*, in which the narrator repeats the formula: "Tyler's words coming out of my mouth" (FC, 98, 114, 155). Before Dowell can propose to Nancy, however, he feels that he has to strengthen his masculinity:

[W]hat I then had to do was a little fighting with real life, some wrestling with men of business, some traveling amongst larger cities, something harsh, something masculine. I didn't want to present myself to Nancy Rufford as a sort of old maid. (GS, 144)

As in the eponymous gatherings of *Fight Club*, Dowell perceives masculinity in terms of fight and aggression; one important difference, however, is the ideal of economic success that still applies to prewar Western societies in *The Good Soldier* but is portrayed as the weakening and feminizing impact of capitalist and consumerist culture in *Fight Club*.

26 The film *Fight Club*, dir. David Fincher, perf. Edward Norton, Brad Pitt (Art Linson, 1999): chap. 31, 1:48; further references in the text are abbreviated as "FCF."

As the brief comparison of *The Good Soldier* and *Fight Club* indicates, the image of perfect masculinity is in each case linked to the cultural values of the day. Edward's suicide, according to Dowell, is a result of Edward's clash with the (hypocritical) moral standards of the turn of the century. Rather than rewarding the passionate and determined, British society in the Edwardian years condones a passionless average as its norm. This is a sign of social corruption in the eyes of Dowell, who compares the break-up of the friendship between the Dowells and Ashburnhams to the decline of an entire civilization, as "the sack of Rome by the Goths": "[T]he breaking up of our little four-square coterie was such another unthinkable event" (GS, 9). As Astrid Schmid has shown in her study *The Fear of the Other*, the motif of the double typically expresses an "epoch's fear of the collapse of social values."<sup>27</sup> In *The Good Soldier* and *Fight Club*, the motif seems rather indicative of a *longing* for the collapse of a society that has long lost, as the protagonist comes to realize, its social values. The titles of both novels invoke violence and war through an ambivalent position; they seem at the same time to be symptomatic of the social decline of their day<sup>28</sup> and a potential means of social renewal. It is the repression of passions including aggression, both novels suggest, that ultimately leads to physical and psychic destruction. In *The Good Soldier*, the narrator in the end takes a contrary emotional stance to that which he took at the beginning, where he cherished restraint and discipline as the achievements of civilization:

Mind, I am not preaching anything contrary to accepted morality. I am not advocating free love in this or any other case. Society must go on, I suppose, and society can only exist if the normal, if the virtuous, and the slightly-deceitful flourish, and if the passionate, the headstrong and the too-truthful are condemned to suicide and madness. [...] Yes, society must go on; it must breed, like rabbits. That is what we are here for. But then, I don't like society – much. (GS, 291)

Dowell's disgust of the affect-regulated, fraudulent society is paired with a deep-seated fatigue that prevents him from the revolutionary gesture of imagining a new (old?) society that would allow for, or even reward, impulsivity and passion.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to Dowell's melancholic, elegiac tone of

27 Astrid Schmid, *The Fear of the Other: Approaches to English Stories of the Double (1764–1910)* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1996): 36.

28 Cf. Hoffmann's observation that, although *The Good Soldier*, despite its title, is not a war novel, its story nonetheless "analyzes the seeds of destruction in human nature and, by extension, in human society on the verge of war" (Hoffmann, *Ford*, 52–53).

29 H. Robert Huntley has suggested that the novel proposes as ideal a medieval temperament according to which a man could be idealist and altruist while he at the same time, in the

the above-quoted passage, *Fight Club* envisions a joyful, revolutionary spectacle of the self-destruction of postmodern, late capitalist civilization and a liberating return to a primordial state of evolution.

*Fight Club*: "I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts"

Like *The Good Soldier*, *Fight Club* is told in retrospective and, like Dowell, its narrator withholds crucial information and insights from readers in order to make them participate in his own former ignorance. The setting of his narration, however, could not be more different from that of *The Good Soldier*. In contrast to the comfortable, calm setting of the fireside in a country cottage, the narrator of *Fight Club* tells his story while being held at gunpoint by his close friend Tyler Durden in a skyscraper that is about to explode. Thus, the narrator's reconstruction of how he ended up in this desperate situation is presented as a final, extended flashback – while the discourse time is three minutes (FC, 15), the story time covers several months. In contrast to *The Good Soldier*, the narrator is not discredited from the very beginning by cultural, epistemological, or intellectual deficiencies. Nonetheless, the novel includes a number of ambiguous remarks that gain a second meaning when reread;<sup>30</sup> like *The Good Soldier*, the eventual revelation that the narrator and Tyler Durden are the same person invites readers to a circular reading that revisits crucial points in the narrative to discover their second, actual meanings. For example, the narrator's remark, "Tyler had been around a long time before we met" (FC, 32), and his question, "If I could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?" (FC, 33), hint at the *doppelgänger* structure. The film even reinforces the latter cue by a subsequent cut from the narrator to the first sight of Tyler, played by Brad Pitt. Moreover, the narrator acknowledges: "Sometimes, Tyler speaks for me" (FC, 52) and "Tyler's words coming out of my mouth. I used to be such a nice person" (FC, 98). He realizes that Marla Singer and Tyler, despite having a passionate love affair, are never in the same room as long as he is around, but that Tyler appears "[f]ast as a magic trick" (FC, 71) as soon as Marla has left. He draws, however, the wrong conclusion from this observation: "I'm starting to wonder if Tyler and Marla are the same person. [...] Tyler and Marla are never in the same room. I never see them together" (FC, 65). It is only toward the end of the story, when characters call him 'Mr. Durden,' that the narrator eventually

fields of love and war, could follow his unbridled passion (H. Robert Huntley, *The Alien Protagonist of Ford Madox Ford* [Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1970]: 177).

30 Cf. Ira Nayman, "The Man Who Wasn't There: Narrative Ambiguity in 3 Recent Hollywood Films," *Creative Screenwriting* 8.2 (2001): 57–60.

realizes: "We both use the same body, but at different times" (FC, 164); "This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He is a dissociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination" (FC, 168). In some respects, Tyler and the narrator have a similar relationship to that of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, since Tyler takes over the narrator's body at night, as soon as he sleeps, to commit acts of terrorism, but also to make love to Marla. Just like Dr Jekyll, the narrator projects his own repressed wishes, sexual desires, and aggressive impulses on the split-off second self, which typically acts at night. In the film version, Marla acknowledges this reference to the *locus classicus* of the *doppelgänger* literature with her sarcastic remark: "You're Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Jackass" (FCF, chap. 32, 1:53). Another shared characteristic of Robert Louis Stevenson's and Chuck Palahniuk's texts is the increasing antagonism of the competing versions of the self, which, as Otto Rank notes in his influential early twentieth-century psychoanalytical study *Der Doppelgänger* (or, in English translation, *The Double*), is typical of the literary motif as well as the psychic phenomenon of the *doppelgänger*: both habitually include the impulse "to rid oneself of the uncanny opponent in a violent manner."<sup>31</sup> Just as *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was informed by and fed back into the psychiatric discourse of its day,<sup>32</sup> *Fight Club* was influenced by the late twentieth-century psychiatric accounts of the *doppelgänger* syndrome, called Multiple Personality Disorder and later Dissociative Identity Disorder in the influential *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*;<sup>33</sup> and, in turn, novel and film have raised the attention of psychologists and psychiatrists.<sup>34</sup>

- 31 Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytical Study* [1914] (London: Karnac, Maresfield Library, 1989): 16. Unlike Dr Jekyll, however, the narrator does not deliberately bring about his identity split and he initially is not even aware of his second personality. Another important difference resides in the (as it turns out, imaginary) interaction with the second self – by contrast, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde are unable to meet; they strictly alternate. Cf. also Kirsten Stirling's comparison of *Fight Club*, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*: "Dr Jekyll and Mr Jackass: *Fight Club*, a Refraction of Hogg's *Justified Sinner* and Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*," in *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film*, ed. Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004): 83–94.
- 32 Cf., for example, Roger Luckhurst's edition of *The Strange Case*, which discusses the interaction between psychological theory and Stevenson's novel in Luckhurst's introduction and includes extracts from relevant contemporary sources as appendices (Roger Luckhurst, "Introduction," in *Robert Louis Stevenson. Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales*, ed. Roger Luckhurst [Oxford: OUP, 2006]: vii–xxxii).
- 33 The 1980 version of the manual was the first to list 'Multiple Personality Disorder' and describes it as follows: "A. The existence within the individual of two or more distinct personalities, each of which is dominant at a particular time. B. The personality that is dominant at any particular time determines the individual's behavior. C. Each individual personality is complex and integrated with its own unique behavior pattern and social relationships" (American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-III* [Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1980]:

The film version of *Fight Club* employs not only the above-mentioned verbal remarks, but also visual clues to hint at the *doppelgänger* structure and to undermine the narrator's reliability. The film starts with a computer animation that travels through the inside of the protagonist's head to the oral cavity and into the gun stuck in his mouth, and then has the narrator explain his situation in a voice-over.<sup>35</sup> Beginning the film with such a sequence of external focalization,<sup>36</sup> the visual code suggests that the following might emanate not from an objective, reliable, extradiegetic narrative agency (the 'image maker' or 'perceptual pilot' discussed at the beginning of this essay), but from the subjective view of the protagonist: The action might literally take place within his head. This initial sequence can be regarded as an attempt to create a filmic equivalent to autodiegetic narration, in which the I establishes himself as a narrator who in the following flashback will use the experiencing I, the I-as-protagonist, as a focalizer from whose perspective the story is perceived. Subsequently, the film switches between these three perspectives, juxtaposing the narrator's recollecting voice-overs with subjective shots that use the protagonist as focalizer and with objective shots and sequences.<sup>37</sup> That the shots presented from the focalizer's perspective are unreliable, and that the protagonist is hence a fallible filter, is indicated through forms of internal-focalization-in-mind screen shots that visualize his fantasies, such as a plane crash or his meditations during support group meetings.<sup>38</sup> The special appeal of

- 259). The criteria were altered in the following editions; since the fourth edition in 1994, the phenomenon has been labeled Dissociative Identity Disorder (cf. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-IV* [Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994]: 484–487).
- 34 Cf., for example, Steven N. Gold, "Fight Club: A Depiction of Contemporary Society as Dissociogenic," *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 5 (2004): 13–34. Many other films in recent years focus on a dissociated personality, for instance *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Identity* (2003), *The Machinist* (2004), and *Secret Window* (2004).
- 35 Cf. Andreas Thiemann, "Vorspann – Into the Mind of the Psychopath," in *David Fincher*, ed. Frank Schnelle (Berlin: Bertz, 2002): 7–16, 12–14; and Anthrin Steinke, *Aspekte postmodernen Erzählens im amerikanischen Film der Gegenwart* (Trier: WVT, 2007): 200–204.
- 36 Cf. Eva Laass, *Broken Taboos, Subjective Truths: Forms and Functions of Unreliable Narration in Contemporary American Cinema: A Contribution to Film Narratology* (Trier: WVT, 2008): 187.
- 37 As Eva Laass notes, thirty-five out of forty-three sequences include a voice-over commentary by the narrator (Laass, *Broken Taboos*, 180).
- 38 Cf. Jörg Helbig, "'Follow the White Rabbit!' Signale erzählerischer Unzuverlässigkeit im zeitgenössischen Spielfilm," in *Was stimmt denn jetzt? Unzuverlässiges Erzählen in Literatur und Film*, ed. Fabienne Liptay and Yvonne Wolf (Munich: edition text + kritik, 2005): 131–146, 139, and Laass, *Broken Taboos*, 188.



*Fight Club*, of course, as I will elaborate below, is that viewers fully realize only in retrospect how many of the shots that they initially took as objective, reliable records have instead been hallucinations of the protagonist.<sup>39</sup>

Just as the unreliable narrator Dowell and also, to a lesser degree, the narrator of *Fight Club*, reflect on their storytelling and thereby give the novels metafictional potential,<sup>40</sup> in David Fincher's film adaptation the unreliable narration has metafilmic qualities. Tyler is introduced in both novel and film as a banquet waiter and projectionist. The narrator first explains how Tyler inserts barely perceivable pornographic images into children's films; *Fight Club* takes up this device at the end of the film, when an image of a penis is inserted between the collapsing skyscrapers. This image is shown long enough to be perceived by cinema audiences, who can thus identify this self-reflexive gesture. However, the film also contains a number of subliminal images of Tyler before his first appearance, which are shown too briefly to be noticed by audiences and can be identified only when watching the DVD version in slow motion<sup>41</sup> – therefore, the narrator's observation, "Tyler had been around a long time before we met" (FC, 32), also applies to cinema audiences. Furthermore, the narrator in both the novel and the film emphasizes Tyler's responsibility for changing the film reels, so that audiences do not notice the fabrication of their cinematic experience and can fully revel in the illusion provided (cf. FC, 26–28; FCF, chap. 12, 0:31). The film version later stages such a changeover, which audiences notice because it fails. When Tyler declares during a fight-club session, "[Y]ou're the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world," the image begins to shake as if the film were about to be torn apart (FCF, chap. 24, 1:21). The same shot is repeated, with the tottering image of Norton's head, when the narrator starts to comprehend that he is the same person as

39 Further visual clues for the *doppelgänger* structure are the identical briefcases Tyler and the narrator carry at their first meeting. In addition to these visual hints, the film inserts remarks such as the protagonist's complaint to his physician that he suffered from narcolepsy: "I wake in strange places. I got no idea how I got there" (FCF, chap. 4, 0:05). Moreover, when the protagonist hits himself in the office of his boss to compromise him, he comments in a voice-over, "For some reason, I thought about my first fight, with Tyler" (FCF, chap. 22, 1:14), and thereby anticipates his later recognition (and its visualization for audiences) that all fights with Tyler had actually been fights with himself.

40 Cf., for example, "It is melodrama; but I can't help it" (GS, 131) or Dowell's reflection that his sad story cannot be a tragedy, since it lacks both a sense of destiny and a villain (GS, 192).

41 Cf. Steinke, *Aspekte*, 197. Cf. Frank Schnelle, "Bewahrer und Zerstörer – David Fincher und sein Kino der Tricks, Täuschungen und Doppelstrategien," in *David Fincher*, ed. Frank Schnelle (Berlin: Bertz, 2002): 17–60, 54–58, for a brief discussion of subliminal images in *Fight Club* and Fincher's earlier film *Se7en*.

Tyler (FCF, chap. 31, 1:48).<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the narrator in a voice-over employs the projectionist's job as a metaphor of his split identity. After having realized his identity disorder, the protagonist falls asleep; as audiences know by now, Tyler will take over his personality and undertake nocturnal mischief in his name. The narrator comments: "It's called a changeover – the movie goes on and nobody in the audience has any idea" (FCF, chap. 31, 1:50). The film here comments on the fact that audiences mistook the presented images as objective accounts rather than subjective, selective, and deluded views: 'nobody in the audience had any idea' how the movie's action actually went on. Audiences are confronted with their misapprehension of the subjective images as objective ones by another clever visual device: When the protagonist finally turns against Tyler because he has realized the danger of Project Mayhem as set up by Tyler, they fight in an underground parking garage. The images of this fight are cut against black-and-white sequences from a security camera that is installed in the garage. In these pictures, the protagonist hits himself, throws himself down the stairs, and so forth. Here, the film self-reflexively exhibits the unreliability of its camerawork which, as signaled through the beginning in the protagonist's mind, has frequently been the work of a subjective camera rather than the objective, reliable recorder of events typical of mainstream Hollywood cinema.

As mentioned above, the structures of both novel and film, which begin with the story's end and then offer an extended flashback, parallel the readers' task to read the novel and watch the film circularly. The film comments self-reflexively on this need for a circular reading: It makes the protagonist reconsider crucial moments of his life with Tyler Durden by repeating images of the film that replace Tyler by the protagonist. These flashbacks are presented as a repetition with a difference, just as the circular structure of the story and its reading imply not identical action but action with a difference. Strictly speaking, both the novel's and film's structure and their readings thus form spirals rather than closed circles. The film's final scene self-reflexively draws attention to this repetition with a difference when it stages the initial scene with only slight variations. For instance, Tyler says, "This is it. The beginning. Ground zero," rather than just, "This is it. Ground zero," before the narrator comments in a voice-over: "I think this is about where we came in." When Tyler asks the protagonist to say his last words before being killed, he answers, "I still can't think of anything," thereby highlighting the temporal difference to his initial remark – "I can't think of anything" – a comment that Tyler characterizes as "flashback humor" (cf. FCF, chap. 2, 0:02 and FCF, chap. 35, 2:04).

42 For further metafilmic comments, including intertextual references, see Steinke, *Aspekte*, 193–197.

To an even stronger degree than *The Good Soldier*, therefore, *Fight Club*, by the late confirmation of the narrator's unreliability, forces readers to undertake a circular / spiral reading. This device intensifies and makes explicit the reading attitude that, according to hermeneutic theory, characterizes every act of reading: in starting from certain assumptions and constantly adapting them while reading, as well as understanding a detail of the text in connection to its overall meaning and vice versa, readers have to undergo various mental 'hermeneutic circles.' These have been renamed, more accurately, 'hermeneutic spirals' to take into account the reader's modified understanding, which is the result of every circular hermeneutic interpretation of the text and simultaneously the basis for the renewed engagement with it.<sup>43</sup> In both *The Good Soldier* and *Fight Club*, however, the reader's growing understanding of the text's meaning has been strategically complicated by the narrator, who deceives readers and delivers crucial information only at the end of the story, thus making the hermeneutic circle / spiral particularly palpable.

Besides employing a circular / spiral structure and, additionally, inviting circular / spiral readings, *Fight Club*, more outspokenly than *The Good Soldier*, envisages a circular concept of history: In fight clubs and meetings of Project Mayhem, Tyler and the protagonist conjure up the return to a primordial state of civilization. They celebrate the idea of the destruction and subsequent re-birth of culture, and, in particular, of cultural notions of masculinity.<sup>44</sup> Tyler in an intimate moment shares with the narrator his vision of an ideal, future world as a state beyond capitalist consumerism and the comforts of technological advancement:

You'll hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center [...]. Imagine [...] stalking elk past department store windows and stinking rags of beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos on hangers; you'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life. (FC, 124–125)

This return to a precivilized, pretechnological state is fashioned as a reaction against and liberation from all cultural traditions, including antiquity. As Tyler

43 Cf. Jürgen Bolten, "Die hermeneutische Spirale: Überlegungen zu einer integrativen Literaturtheorie," *Poetica* 17.3 (1985): 355–371.

44 Cf. Friday, "A Generation," for an alternative reading that grounds the film's circularity in its preoccupation with masochism: "[A]ll that *Fight Club* represents is the (narrative) circularity of the one condition that remains constant as a source of identity: masochism"; "This tautology – Tyler is the narrator, the beginning is the end, redress is the symptom – means that in effect, there is no temporal difference in *Fight Club*'s narrative. There is only the existence of a singular, a priori, masochistic condition that has no real temporal context or coordinates outside of its own act of self-assertion."

emphasizes, their acts of (self-)annihilation are understood as forms of appropriation and empowerment: "This is our world, now, our world,' Tyler says, 'and those ancient people are dead'" (FC, 14). The narrator adopts this contempt for cultural tradition: "I wanted to burn the Louvre [...] and wipe my ass with *Mona Lisa*. This is my world, now. This is my world, my world, and those ancient people are dead" (FC, 124). Tyler and the narrator aim at the impossible, since they plan to extinguish all traces of historical tradition and to return to a fully innocent state that itself will not be the nucleus of a renewed development: "We wanted to blast the world free of history" (FC, 124). This wishful fantasy decisively aims at a circular rather than a spiral development: once world history has returned to its (imagined) origins, it is meant to be arrested and preserved in this state.

The dissatisfaction and even disgust with the status quo is, as in *The Good Soldier*, expressed through metaphors of (faked) individual, and in extension social, disease.<sup>45</sup> Troubled by his lack of sleep, the protagonist finds comfort in the arms of strangers who are terminally ill. Their closeness to death provides the protagonist with more direct access to a sense of being alive than his everyday life as insurance specialist and obsessive consumer – a life that is characterized by a feeling of alienation reminiscent of Jean Baudrillard's simulacra: "This is how it is with insomnia. Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy. The insomnia distance of everything, you can't touch anything and nothing can touch you" (FC, 19). Marla likewise learns to value her life through encounters with the moribund.<sup>46</sup> Like Florence, she fakes her illness, but the narrator of *Fight Club* is aware of her trickery, feels unmasked, and even begins to doubt the genuineness of the others' sufferings: "To Marla I'm a fake. Since the second night I saw her, I can't sleep. Still, I was the first fake, unless, maybe these people are faking with their lesions and coughs and tumors" (FC, 23).

The attendances of support-group meetings are linked up with a discontent with contemporary masculinity, a shared topic of many films since the 1990s, such as *In the Company of Men* (1997), *Happiness* (1998), *American*

45 In his reading of *Fight Club*, the psychologist Steven N. Gold argues that the narrator's dissociative identity disorder is presented as an intense form of a general dissociation in contemporary culture: "[U]biquitous features of modern society – advanced technology, rampant consumerism, and rapid mobility – induce, to a greater or lesser extent, a pervasive form of dissociation in its members" (Gold, "*Fight Club*," 14).

46 "She actually felt alive. [...] All her life [...] there was no real sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with" (FC, 38). Later, the narrator replaces the support groups by the even more liminal experience of fighting: "You aren't alive anywhere like you are alive in fight club" (FC, 50).

*Beauty* (1999), and *American Psycho* (2000).<sup>47</sup> Among the protagonist's dearest groups is 'Remaining Men Together,' a self-help group for men with cancer whose testicles had to be removed. In particular, Bob, who has grown large breasts because of experiments with hormones during his career as a body-builder, represents the emasculated, feminized man who not only metaphorically but physically corresponds to the eunuch narrator of *The Good Soldier*. This lack of masculinity is to be cured through all-male gatherings and competition in fight clubs, where the "generation of men raised by women" (FC, 50) fight their absent fathers and cherish self-destruction rather than self-improvement (cf. FC, 49, 53–54). This liberation from female education includes the repudiation of heterosexual bonds, which are seen as similarly feminizing: "I'm a thirty-year-old boy, and I'm wondering whether another woman is really the answer I need" (FC, 51).<sup>48</sup>

The suffering that is celebrated in the fight clubs has religious overtones. It replaces the helplessness and psychic pain of the support groups with the active seeking of physical pain and the unconditional following of a messiah figure who promises redemption. The film adaptation reinforces the Christian subtext visually: When the protagonist first meets Bob and cries in his arms, he leaves an imprint of tears on Bob's shirt, which is reminiscent of "The Veronica" on which Jesus' face is imprinted by sweat and blood. Later, in the fight clubs, both the protagonist and Tyler are repeatedly shown with outstretched arms and bleeding bodies, evoking the imagery of Christ's crucifixion. Further, the protagonist perceives the nonnecessity of language in fight clubs as an experience of community and redemption "like Pentecostal Church [...]. Afterwards we all felt saved" (FCF, chap. 15, 0:44).<sup>49</sup> The fighting is an attempt to gain paternal acknowledgment. Both Tyler and the protagonist have not known their fathers and Tyler emphasizes that he fights his father in the clubs. This individual father is directly linked to the paternal God figure, which is equally distant:

If you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never knew your father,

47 Cf. Asbjørn Grønstad, "One-Dimensional Men: *Fight Club* and the Poetics of the Body," *Film Criticism* 28.1 (2003): 1–23, 7.

48 Cf. Robert Westerfelhaus and Robert Alan Brookey, "At the Unlikely Confluence of Conservative Religion and Popular Culture: *Fight Club* as Heteronormative Ritual," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 24.3–4 (2004): 302–326, for a reading of *Fight Club* as a rite of passage into heterosexuality.

49 Cf. also Christopher Deacy's discussion of *Fight Club* as a religious parable in "Integration and Rebirth through Confrontation: *Fight Club* and *American Beauty* as Contemporary Religious Parables," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 17.1 (2002): 61–73.

[...] what do you believe about God? [...] [Y]ou spend your life searching for a father and a God. (FC, 141)

The fighting and the terrorist projects seek, in a masochistic manner, acknowledgment via punishment and for the eventual reconciliation with God:

We are God's middle children according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in History and no special attention. Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope of damnation or redemption. Which is worse, hell or nothing? Only if we're caught and punished can we be saved. [...] The farther you run, the more God wants you back. (FC, 141)<sup>50</sup>

The project of remasculinization further entails the liberation from late capitalist consumer culture, which is portrayed as another source of feminization.<sup>51</sup> Before he meets his alter ego Tyler, the protagonist is preoccupied with shopping and improving his flat: In his eyes, he fulfills a female role, since he is a "slave" to his "nesting instinct" (FC, 43). How little individuality and satisfaction the protagonist gains from this is highlighted in the film version, in which his flat is displayed as an IKEA catalogue, with product descriptions and prices attached to every piece of furniture. The narrator's question, "What kind of dining set defines me as a person?" comments on the futility of such self-definition (FCF, chap. 4, 0:05). By destroying all of the protagonist's possessions, Tyler frees him from his materialistic attitude. Moreover, he inspires both the protagonist and other members of fight clubs, and, later, of Project Mayhem, to abandon their jobs in favor of paramilitary training. Tyler utilizes their frustration with the American dream of self-fulfillment, success, and fame: "We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that some day we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't. And we're just learning this fact" (FC, 166; FCF, chap. 20, 1:08).<sup>52</sup>

50 Cf. also the much-quoted film version: "We are the middle children of History, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives" (FCF, chap. 20, 1:07–08).

51 As many critics have noted, Susan Faludi's study *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: Morrow, 1999) has presented a similar connection between consumerism and feminization. Cf., for example, J. Michael Clark, "Faludi, *Fight Club*, and Phallic Masculinity: Exploring the Emasculating Politics of Patriarchy," *Journal of Men's Studies* 11.1 (2002): 65–76.

52 The casting of Brad Pitt in the role of Tyler Durden gives these preachings an ironic note and indicate that "his philosophies are a fantasy and a delusion" (Jesse Kavadlo, "The Fiction of Self-Destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralist," *Stirrings Still* 2.2 [2005]: 3–24, 10). Likewise, the contempt of the protagonist and Tyler for the stylized male bodies displayed on a Gucci advertisement ("Is that what a man looks like?" [FCF, chap. 15,

Making them destroy public buildings and sabotage meetings, Tyler transforms the men into “guerrilla terrorists of the service industry” (FC, 81). By doing so, he shows them a way to emancipate themselves from traditional concepts of masculinity, which demand that the ideal man be economically independent and successful – a concept that had still characterized the gender ideals of the prewar society depicted in *The Good Soldier*, as we have seen.<sup>53</sup>

While this project is initially portrayed as witty and liberating, it soon turns out to be crueler and more uniform than consumer society, since it not only accepts the deaths of individual members, but even aims at the annihilation of the entire civilization.<sup>54</sup> The fight clubs and Project Mayhem give each member a feeling of grandeur by investing them with the power of destruction that is praised as the ‘control of history’:

The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world [...]. What Tyler says about being the crap and the slaves of history, that’s how I felt. I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I’d never have. [...] I wanted the whole world to hit bottom. (FC, 122–123)

This project of destruction is paradoxically presented as a form of saving, both in a spiritual sense, as mentioned above, and in an ecological sense. Rather than learning to spare resources and reduce consumption for the environment’s sake, the world needs to be freed from humankind temporarily, until the development of civilization can be restarted:

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0:43)) are undercut by the image of Pitt’s toned torso in the next shot (cf. Jeanne Wolff Bernstein, “Fight Club,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 83 [2002]: 1191–1200, 1192; and Pamela Church Gibson, “Queer Looks, Male Gazes, Taut Torsos and Designer Kables: Contemporary Cinema, Consumption and Masculinity,” in *The Trouble with Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Phil Powrie, Ann Davies, and Bruce Babington [London: Wallflower, 2004]: 176–186, 185; and Steinke, *Aspekte*, 195).

53 Cf. also Tilmann Höss, “Machismo als Gesellschaftskritik: *American Beauty*, *Fight Club*, *The Sea-Wolf*,” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 49.4 (2001): 350–360.

54 Cf. Ines Kappert, “Krisendiskurs ‘Mann’: Ermächtigung auf Umwegen (*Fight Club*, *American Psycho*),” in *Gender revisited: Subjekt- und Politikbegriffe in Kultur und Medien*, ed. Katharina Baisch et al. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2002): 251–267, 259. As Stefanie Remlinger notes, readers / cinema audiences undergo a similar development to the protagonist himself from admiring Tyler’s innovative and courageous ideas to realizing their harmful impact and their cruelty (Stefanie Remlinger, “*Fight Club*: The Most Dangerous Movie Ever?” in *The Aesthetics and Pragmatics of Violence*, ed. Annette Pankratz and Michael Hensen [Passau: Karl Stutz, 2001]: 141–153, 150).

For thousands of years, human beings had screwed up and trashed and crapped on this planet, and now history expected me to clean up after everyone. I have to wash out and flatten my soup cans. And account for every drop of used motor oil. [...] It’s Project Mayhem that is going to save the world. A cultural ice age. A prematurely induced dark age. Project Mayhem will force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for the Earth to recover. (FC, 124–125)

The latter phrasing of a ‘dormant’ humanity or a humanity ‘in remission’ shows that the return to an ‘original’ state, which has earlier been imagined as the closing of a circle, might after all instigate a spiral development in which humanity starts from the same premises but might develop differently. This aspect of spiral renewal is not as important, however, as the fantasy of coming full circle: Tyler’s visions do not offer scenarios of future development that go beyond the moment of annihilation.

The different endings, of the novel and the film are significant with regard to the respective ideological stances of novel and film (that is, the view readers ascribe to the ‘implied author’). Although the film’s protagonist (in accordance with the novel) eventually turns against Tyler by attempting to stop Project Mayhem and, in particular, the murder of Marla, the final sequence endorses the fascination with (self-)destruction and the return to ‘Ground Zero’ to a certain degree. The film ends with the death of Tyler and the reunion of the protagonist and Marla, who are shown in front of exploding and collapsing skyscrapers: These explosions are presented as an awe-inspiring spectacle that thrilled audiences can watch together with Marla and the protagonist; the sequence does not at all show the danger and harm that these explosions might mean to passersby in the nocturnal city.<sup>55</sup> As with the rest of the film, whose portrayal of violence, terrorism, and machismo has inspired ongoing journalistic and academic debates, it is hard to determine the ideological stance of the final scene, which revels in violence and thereby might either criticize or glamorize it.<sup>56</sup>

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55 Audience reactions to the final film sequence have in all probability changed after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, which have called attention to the human pain involved in collapsing buildings and hence have made problematic the glamorization or ironization of such violence. Even taking into account such changed reception attitudes, however, the final images remain ambiguously set between a fascination with violence and its denunciation.

56 Grønstadt, “One-Dimensional Men,” 5. For a critique of the “senseless brutality” that is “glorified for its cathartic and cleansing properties,” cf., for instance, Henry A. Giroux, “Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: *Fight Club*, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence,” *Journal of Composition Theory* 21.1 (2001): 1–31, <[http://www.henryagiroux.com/online\\_articles/fight\\_club.htm](http://www.henryagiroux.com/online_articles/fight_club.htm)> [April 22, 2008]. For

The novel, by contrast, more clearly distances itself from Tyler's megalomania. Here, the protagonist finds himself in what he regards as 'heaven' but what the reader can identify as a mental institution through hints given by the narrative agency. The final chapter of the novel thus distances itself from the grand gesture of destruction and, instead, once again emphasizes the narrator's unreliability: He still dreams of fulfilling Project Mayhem and regards the psychiatrist as the God and *ersatz*-father he had formerly searched for and at the same time rejected. In their second, spiral reading of *Fight Club*, readers will, for this reason, distrust not only the epistemic reliability of the narrator, but also his ideology, that is, his growing fascination with violent and self-destructive masculinity. Hence, toward the end of the novel, Booth's anthropomorphic 'implied author' or Chatman's 'sense of purpose reconstructible from the text' become more clearly discernible; the ideological stance of this implied author seems to be a critique of the glorification of a masculinity that is based on physical strength, ruthlessness, and violence against the self and others and that has to set itself apart from women as much as from 'effeminizing' aspects of society. By contrast, the position that the novel's author, Chuck Palahniuk, has promoted both in interviews and in the afterword to the novel's reissue, is less critical. He seems fascinated by the novel and film's impact – which led to the foundation of real-world fight clubs – since it would seem to confirm his feeling that there is a need to develop new forms of male self-expression and communication. In his 2005 afterword, Palahniuk comments on his attempt to offer a 'new,' less 'touchy-feely' model of masculinity:

[T]here was no novel that presented a new social model for men to share their lives. It would have to give men the structure and roles and rules of a game – or a task – but not too touchy-feely. It would have to model a new way to gather and be together.<sup>57</sup>

In an interview, Palahniuk even embraces the label "macho porn," which one critic has used for *Fight Club*.<sup>58</sup> This contrast between the author's point of view and the more critical attitude readers can ascribe to the narrative agency of the novel illustrates the problems involved in Booth's resurrection of an anthropomorphic implied author functioning as the 'better' self of the author: While this relationship might be tenable from the perspective of the reader

who constructs this second self of the author, arguments attempting to maintain such a relationship from the perspective of the author as well would have to resort to a similar explanation pattern as the novel itself and argue for Palahniuk's undeliberate, hitherto unconscious invention of this second, ideal self.

To conclude, the construction of second selves – and their belated recognition by readers – in both novels and in the film version of *Fight Club* demand circular, or rather spiral, reading processes, which elicit second stories. These circular structural devices are reflected on the level of content by the envisioning of a circular / spiral concept of biography and history. In *The Good Soldier*, the lives of the protagonists develop in spirals that compulsively return to the same significant date while, in *Fight Club*, the everyday life of the unnamed protagonist is characterized by tedious working days that so much resemble each other that the protagonist perceives his life as 'the copy of a copy of a copy.' In both novels, the narrators' fascination with their second, more masculine selves is bound up with the vision of a new society, of a circular (or possibly spiral) return to a former state of history that allows for a liberated, more passionate way of life and a form of unrestricted, allegedly 'natural' masculinity perceived by the narrators as ideal compared to their own effeminized or eunuchic states. It is precisely this idealization of their second selves and the vision of a new, more natural society via destruction, however, that readers will probably view much more critically in their second readings.

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more ambivalent views, cf. Grønstadt, "One-Dimensional Men," and Kappert, "Krisendiskurs."

57 Chuck Palahniuk, "Afterword," in *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 2006): 209–218, 214.

58 Interview with Geoffrey Kleinman, <[http://www.dvdtalk.com/interviews/chuck\\_palahniuk.html](http://www.dvdtalk.com/interviews/chuck_palahniuk.html)> [November 23, 2008].