

“A Hero Will Rise”: The Myth of the Fascist Man in *Fight Club* and *Gladiator*

The turn of this century, much like the last, engendered a great deal of anxiety about white masculinity. Films such as *The Matrix* (Wachowski, 1999), *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999), *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999), and *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000) responded by introducing a “new man”—a hero with a hard body that would liberate the world from its decadent shackles.¹ Preferring to remain anonymous or disguise his true identity with another name, like Tyler Durden, *Gladiator*, or “The One,” his anonymity makes it possible for him to achieve a legendary, even mythical, status, and act as the focal point for a nation of ordinary men desiring the freedom that submission brings. As such he recalls the heroes of Greco-Roman epics and adventure films of the past, especially the 1960s and 1980s. But even more so he is reminiscent of another centennial “new man”—the “blood and soil” man of fascist discourse and fantasy.² The ideal man envisioned by fascist desire, while representing itself as a revolutionary new masculinity, was instead reactionary toward the potential of modernist multiplicity of discourse, and promoted the male mind as rigidly singular and non-dialectical, a fortress complete unto itself.



In this essay I will examine the representation of a radical “new” masculinity in the films *Gladiator* and *Fight Club* within the framework of socio-political discourse on fascism, particularly Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and Mussolini’s *The Doctrine of Fascism*. These films present images of permeable suffering and injured male bodies while embedding those images within narratives that ultimately guarantee the impermeability of the psychic state of masculinity; they also tend to re-inscribe fascist discourse while self-consciously referencing it as undesirable. *Fight Club*, with its literal and metaphorical “two heads in one,” presents a mixture of Caligari and Hitler with its psychological blundering and *méconnaissance* of its origins.³ *Gladiator*, on the other hand, attempts to counter fascist political fantasies by means of a “natural” man who shuns power, while simultaneously setting up this hero to disenfranchise the masses he is theoretically representing. Both films exhibit a “new” masculinity that is resiliently reactionary: attempts at masculine dialogue, within the self or between men, are answered by a violence that conflates enslavement and liberation, and persuades only by silencing. Both films also imitate the fascist tactic of replacing political discussion and critique with the spectacle of a hysterical mass unity, aestheticizing violence as well as politics.⁴

Fascist movements have never really disappeared. They are characterized by what Roger Griffin calls a "palingenetic ultra-nationalism," which is to say the rebirth of a "true" national identity based on biological superiority, and located in a mythological past.⁵ The nation is conceived of as vital, virile, aggressive, and militaristic, forcibly replacing a weak, passive, ineffectual, and decadent liberal government. Its structure requires a charismatic leader who epitomizes the "new man" and virility of the nation, and who controls the country as the head of state, church, military, and family.⁶ The hierarchical structure also includes a small elite who help maintain the non-representative populism; the people exist as people only in their relation to the state. Fascist movements also involve militaristic organization and attempts to form influential political structures.⁷ Both *Gladiator* and *Fight Club* reflect many of these characteristics. Besides making references to fascist aesthetics—like *Gladiator*'s self-conscious allusion to *Triumph of the Will* (Riefenstahl, 1935) during Commodus's triumphal return to Rome with its arches, banners, billowing flags, and imperial insignia, and *Fight Club*'s black-shirts, militaristic sabotage, and the Aryan blond beauty Angel Face—both films are obsessed with male virility and strength, overcoming weak, decadent, liberal governments, using violence rather than dialogue, and a charismatic hero who will make possible the mythical rebirth of a "nation" of true believers.⁸

There is a fundamental cynicism about political action or dialogue in both movies and a yearning and nostalgia for the simplicity and moral clarity of violence that clearly evokes fascism. The murky invocation of history and politics in the films is subsumed and analogized into the action scenes, replacing the need for actual attention to ideology and making it possible to elide complex problems. Yet while *Gladiator* and *Fight Club* replace a realistic approach to history and politics with an aestheticized, larger-than-life version of it, they insist on their own authenticity by means of their hyper-realistic approach to fighting scenes and the wounds that result. This aestheticized grit tends to replace populist issues like democratic representation with the actions (violent and spectacular) of one individual, and to promote the image of the cut male body—cut in terms of both muscular definition and ritual wounding. These wounds only serve to make the body even more impervious to what it perceives as the ill-defined and weakly structured world within which it functions; it is, however, a world portrayed exactly as fascists portrayed the governments they sought to overthrow: weak, feminine, perverse, effete, and ineffectual.

***Gladiator*: Taking Dictation**

Gladiator and *Fight Club* are not the first films to replicate the fascist tendency to replace politics with spectacle and to catalog and indulge male fantasies of physical invincibility in the midst of crumbling political empires. In this respect they draw on some of the earliest films, such as Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) and D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), which evidenced a fascination with power and its representation as spectacle in the process of mythologizing history. The spectacular displays in these early epic adventure movies easily overwhelm the plot and the loosely structured "messages" of liberation. They also set up the tradition of hyper-masculine muscle men who speak softly and seldom, but who carry a big sword. There was a noticeable surge of Greco-Roman films in the late 1950s and

early 1960s—a period of increasing suburbanization and cold war masculinity in America. While these issues are critiqued to various degrees in Hollywood epics like William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959), Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), and Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), the focus on spectacle to the detriment of liberal politics is clear in the sword and sandal, or peplum, genre films, which were produced in Italy and marketed in America during this period.⁹ These films, like *Ursus, il gladiatore ribelle* (Paoella, 1963), display the conflict built into fascism, which perceives itself as a revolutionary force ridding the world of corruption and debauchery, while in fact it forwards a conservative agenda that evidences little grasp of political dynamics or the complexity of harmonizing disparate cultures and ethnicities.¹⁰ While *Gladiator* is indebted to *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Spartacus* for plot and characters, it has more in common with the peplum films in terms of outwardly indicting fascism while consistently indulging in heroic hyper-masculinity, nostalgia for the simplicity of violence, and the spectacular display of this violence as a substitute for political action.¹¹

In the late 1970s and early 1980s fascism again resurfaced as both an explicit and implicit subject. Termed "Reaganite entertainment" by Andrew Britton, these movies, like *First Blood* (Kotcheff, 1982) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981), were essentially conservative serial fantasy films that focused on reclaiming American pride and masculine prowess. Robin Wood, in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond*, argues that movies like *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) engaged with the fear of fascism from inside—the anxiety that a capitalist democracy has more in common with fascism and totalitarianism than can be acknowledged. While these films establish an American individualist hero as oppositional to a fascistic or totalitarian system, their plot belies a fundamentally conservative adventure narrative. Robert Kolker, in *A Cinema of Loneliness*, also contends that this type of film "affirms that what the viewer has always believed or hoped is (obviously) right and accessible, and assures the viewer excitement and comfort in the process. The films offer nothing new beyond their spectacle, nothing the viewer does not already want, does not immediately accept. That is their conservative power." (257). *Gladiator* is clearly indebted to these films in terms of its aestheticization of history and politics. If *Star Wars* can be said to be more serious about itself and its role in society than the 1930s Buck Rogers serials, then *Gladiator* is even more serious about itself and what it has to say about society.¹² Yet its seriousness, much like Spielberg movies that engage with history, like *Amistad* (1997), tends to rest in its filmic grittiness rather than its subject. Even its attention to the details of violence holds little relation to actual violence and the process of death, and more to a stylistic manipulation of reality structured around rapid film editing, mood music, and technology.

Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* is a movie that mythologizes and distorts history in order to create a political moment that never happened. According to historical accounts, Marcus Aurelius unquestionably declared his son Commodus, then 16, joint emperor in 177 A.D. Up to the time of his death, in 180 A.D., Marcus was successfully engaged in defeating a number of Germanic tribes in the Danubian wars and advised Commodus to pursue this war to its finish. But Commodus



quickly made peace—an act that was unpopular with the Roman Senate—forestalling his father's desire for imperialistic expansionism. While Aurelius had been revered as a skilled emperor and noted philosopher, Commodus, on the other hand, became increasingly more tyrannical and insane during his reign—for example, he emulated Hercules and performed many times as a gladiator. He was eventually strangled, in 192 A.D., by a champion wrestler, appropriately named Narcissus, whom his advisers had hired, and the empire fell into civil war for a time. Thus, *Gladiator* not only distorts history, it also diverts scrutiny from the real

actions and desires of the “enlightened” emperor Marcus Aurelius it wishes to exalt, and posits success in a senate that does not achieve a democracy after disposing of a tyrant.¹³ In contrast, *Spartacus*, *Ben-Hur*, and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* are not only more historically accurate, they also offer more complex visions of the political machinations inherent in a struggle between democracy and totalitarianism. *Ben-Hur* also focuses on anti-Semitism, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* on anti-imperialism, and *Spartacus* on freedom from slavery. *Spartacus*, for example, begins with the image of a raised fist, an antifascist symbol of resistance, and focuses on the development of a populist revolution. *Gladiator*, on the other hand, focuses primarily on Maximus's prowess as a fighter, and a desire to see right prevail in the fulfillment of individual revenge, thus simplifying political differences into a physical show-down between pure good and pure evil, demonstrating a desire for a political clarity and decisiveness that does not exist.¹⁴



Gladiator begins with an outstretched hand gently brushing through grass, bathed in golden light. This peaceful image is then replaced with the face of a Roman general, Maximus, as he watches a bird fly from a grey-hued and burnt-out battlefield. *Gladiator* thus opens with an image of nostalgia and a longing for simplicity in contrast to the complexity, suffering, and spiritual ennui of the present. In these first shots, *Gladiator* demonstrates that it is not so much concerned with the issue of freedom from slavery, as *Spartacus* was, but rather with nostalgia for a mythic home, a sense of *heimat* that the everyman craves more than power. Maximus is portrayed from the first as a man of blood and soil—violence and farming—he even rubs dirt into his hand before he fights. This urge for *heimat* allows the ideas of empire and democratic representation to resolve themselves nicely into an idea best left to a patrician senate to sort out—“Rome.” Making the ultimate goal of democracy a simple life of family and farming provides it with a purity that is easy to submit to, but it also clouds the problematic role of imperialism and warfare in the comfort of nostalgic dreaming. Early in the film Marcus Aurelius actually voices

some concerns about his ability to bring peace with the sword. He even begins a tentative dialogue, saying to Maximus: "Let us talk together now, very simply, as men [...]." But Maximus quickly asserts an unquestioning belief in the aims of empire, saying he will not believe his men "died for nothing" and that they are fighting "for the glory of the empire." When Aurelius asks him, "What is Rome, Maximus?" his answer reinforces the simplistic rift between good and evil that circumvents political complexity in the film: that much of the world is "brutal, cruel and dark"



and "Rome is the light." Maximus has an undialogized belief in the glory of Rome and Aurelius's hazily represented vision of enlightenment, and Marcus quickly finishes talking and hands him the reigns of power so that he can "end the corruption that has crippled" Rome. Maximus is framed in the shot by the imperial insignia, emphasizing that in this moment his fate and individual heroism supersede attention to an exploration

of Roman politics. Marcus chooses Maximus as protector not because he has any political acuity, but because he is a simple, honest, uncomplicated man with almost super-human strength. While Maximus is aware on some level of the contradiction inherent in killing and enslaving others in the name of "the light," he quickly resolves these moments of insight with physical action. He is Marcus's "true" son since he does not know politics in an intellectual sense, but rather allows Marcus's idea of national glory to enter into his soul and rule with undisputed sway by means of discipline and authority, a favorite motif of fascism.¹⁵

There is also a constant vacillation in the film in defining "Rome." Rome is, by turns, a dream, a vision, a mob, a people, and a city; the people are equally ambiguous. We know that the "the senate is the people," according to Senator Gracchus, who speaks of them with almost cynical contempt as an easily-entertained mob, and who does not "pretend to be a man *of* the people but" who does "try to be a man *for* the people." Marcus Aurelius wants to give Rome back to the people, by which he really means the senate, an elite and patrician institution.¹⁶ But Commodus accuses his father of ignoring the people for "learning" and sees them instead as his "children." Commodus, enamored of the world of simulacra and excess, and enraptured with his own paternal benevolence, believes that the greatest vision of Rome is the spectacle of its own mythologized past—an approach that has much in common with the film itself. Yet his final show for the people becomes the death of Roman decadence with the physical and spiritual triumph of Maximus. This show underscores the more latent fascist tendencies of Gracchus's promotion of non-representative populism, and the movie's treatment of the "people" as mere mob who must be fed the proper vision—not the spectacle of death but the more amorphous "greatness of Rome." In addition, Commodus's portrayal as a devious, weak, perverse, and decadent leader—in opposition to Maximus the strong, virtuous natural man—undermines the film's advocacy of Commodus as a fascist.

In the final scene of the film, when Commodus is finally killed by Maximus, the Roman spectators, who have been vocal and powerful enough throughout the film to determine life or death, suddenly fall silent.¹⁷ For oddly enough, the one person to give “the people” a voice in *Gladiator* had been Commodus.

This moment provides a telling lull in the movie’s forceful assertion of democracy. For not only are the people completely silenced—the mob is tamed and held in suspense by a spectacle of death even greater than what Commodus had imagined—but they are revealed as the filmic equivalent of the idea of “the mob”—the crowds in *Gladiator* are often CGI constructions.



When the entertainer Proximo intoned, “We mortals are but shadows and dust,” he was perhaps more apt than he meant to be.¹⁸ This tendency toward computer-generated images over realistic depiction also tends to undermine the grittiness of the violence of the film. For example, while we see Maximus’s wounds and battles in gory detail, the scenes that represent the “glory” of Rome are monuments to fascist glamour. This is especially true of Commodus’s spectacular entrance into Rome celebrating the triumph of his will, with its nods to Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, even down to its faded, almost black and white hue. Their very construction as aestheticized versions of reality make them seem even more fascistic—power here becomes more beautifully streamlined and bereft of imperfections than it could possibly be in reality. Comparable scenes in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and Joseph Mankiewicz’s *Julius Caesar* (1953) are similarly designed, but because of the use of real people and sets they appear less glamorous. The real glamour in *Gladiator*, however, emanates from Maximus.

Commodus, who rules in the film by trying to appeal to the people—“I will give the people a vision of Rome and they will love me for it”—is despised for exactly this liberality; it distracts from the real purpose of empire—imperialism—and thus is defeated on all levels by the true blood-and-soil hero Maximus. In *The Doctrine of Fascism*, Mussolini identifies this kind of representation as a democracy of “quality.” He writes:

Fascism is [...] opposed to that form of democracy which equates a nation to the majority, lowering it to the level of the largest number; but it is the purest form of democracy if the nation be considered [...] from the point of view of quality rather than quantity, as an idea, the mightiest because the most ethical, the most coherent, the truest, expressing itself in a people as the conscience and will of the few, if not, indeed, of one. (15-16)

This democracy of “quality” requires in effect a single vision and a single voice to guide the majority. Aurelius’s Dionysian offspring Commodus may be a tyrant, but more importantly, he is not tyrannical enough. This weakness is specifically tied to his attempts to please the mob, which ultimately lead to scorn and derision, as if

he were a jilted lover. His sister Lucilla quips to him, "The mob is fickle, brother" with the implication that only a fool would try to placate a changeable people rather than telling them what to do.¹⁹ The dynamics of this rejection are aptly described by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, and underscore the fascist ideology of forceful control:

The psyche of the great masses is not receptive to anything that is half-hearted and weak. Like the woman, whose psychic state is determined less by grounds of abstract reason than by an indefinable emotional longing for a force which will complement her nature, and who, consequently, would rather bow to a strong man than dominate a weakling, likewise the masses love a commander more than a petitioner and feel inwardly more satisfied by a doctrine, tolerating no other beside itself, than by the granting of liberalistic freedom with which, as a rule, they can do little, and are prone to feel that they have been abandoned. (43)

The Roman mob, as Gracchus notes, is distracted by the magic Commodus conjures, but they also clearly do not respect him.

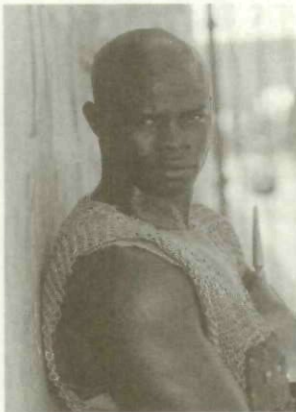
Maximus, on the other hand, controls the people by either telling them what to do, as with the gladiators, or by ridiculing them after entertaining and shocking them with his fighting prowess. He shouts after one especially brief and spectacular fight: "are you entertained?" While he means this jab ironically, the coliseum audience remains indifferent to its implications. The film, although it ostensibly critiques the use of spectacle at such moments, remains a movie that consists primarily of fighting scenes, and is self-consciously marketed as such.²⁰ Although Maximus's ideals are antithetical to the system of entertainment he is trapped within, he, like the film, never steps outside those boundaries. He despises, but does not reject it (as Spartacus does). Rather he promises to give the crowd something they have not seen before: with his fighting sword and fighting words, he promises the aggressive, virile rebirth of "true" Roman national identity. The dream he frames for the audience is similar to the one Mussolini details:

[. . .] a higher life, founded on duty, a life free from the limitations of time and space, in which the individual by self-sacrifice, the renunciation of self-interest, by death itself, can achieve that purely spiritual existence in which his value as a man consists. (10)

Maximus's vows to dispose of the weak emperor and establish a small ruling elite (the senate) makes him the focal point of the dream of Rome in a way that distracts from the problem of real democratic representation, and through his self-sacrifice and death he successfully restores the continuity of Roman imperialism.

The movie's focus on Maximus as a heroic super-man who is contradictorily "of the people" also tends to circumvent the differences and conflicts inherent in democracies. His demeaned status in society is supposed to give him legitimacy as the true representative of the people; he is, after all, "the general who became a slave." But he always and obviously transcends them: naturally elite, and therefore fit to rule and control, his inherent superiority makes him the central personality in all his interactions, removing any complexity of inter-personal and inter-national interactions as all who come into contact with him submit.²¹ He even makes a joke of it—one gladiator asks Maximus if he ever campaigned in Germania and they

laugh, because their former national and familial ties have become obsolete with the advent of Maximus's cadre—what Martin Fradley calls “the film's glib rhetorical attempt at racial relativism” (247). Outside of his sphere, the other “peoples” of the film are consistently dehumanized: gladiatorial opponents are masked, and the people who watch in the stadiums are largely indistinguishable computer-generated images—the perfect filmic illustration of non-representative populism.²² Maximus, as the superior white male, de-necessitates all difference, marking the political realm of complex maneuverings as devious and “feminine.” In a conversation with Lucilla, he denigrates her for her “comfort” with lying and “talent for survival.” In response she points out: “you never had to. Life is more simple for a soldier.” But Lucilla's apt comments about the complexity of a woman's position in the Roman world are swept under the table, just as were Aurelius's questions, by Maximus's certainty in the value of blind obedience to an ideal. His submission to the “glory of the empire” runs so deep that even when he removes the tattoo of the Roman legion from his arm by carving it off, he is still completely ruled by the undisputed truth within. This marks his rebirth into the role of Gladiator, signifying his fate as a man who does not rely on the slippery and relativistic world of the feminine, but who uses his muscular and impervious male body to reshape the fates of nations.



Ironically, the final scene of the film portrays Juba, the freed black gladiator, declaring: “Now we're free. I will see you again. But not yet, not yet.” His literal freedom from chains at that point is meant to emphasize the blossoming of Roman democracy and populist rule, underscored by the camera's pan out from the stadium to the whole of “Rome.” While Juba is clearly based on Draba, in *Spartacus*, the two characters have little in common. In *Spartacus*, it is Draba's refusal to kill Spartacus and his attempted assassination of Senator Crassus that gives Spartacus the impetus to begin a full-scale revolution. Yet *Spartacus* is a film about the populist struggle against

oppressive forces, while *Gladiator* is much more of a one-man show, with Maximus calling the shots and incurring the glory. Juba is not becoming part of the Roman Empire, as such a Roman empire does not exist, not yet. We are meant to identify here with the modern-day counterpart of the “dream of Rome”—the American “vision” of democracy almost always about to come to fruition. Our vision of “Rome” at the end of the film is of an empty and silent city, made secure by the sacrifice of a natural white man, listening to the compelling voice of western imperialism within him.

***Fight Club's* Misrecognition of the Self**

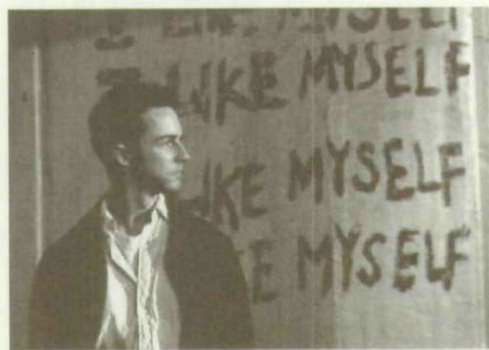
David Fincher's *Fight Club* opens with a similar nod to the forceful imperialist voice within. Its initial images show thoughts moving rapidly along the synapses of the narrator's brain, the camera eventually panning outside the body to show his hand holding a gun to his mouth. Thus *Fight Club* begins with the threat of violence and a search for the sources of the narrator's identity. This image is his moment of realization, when he hopes to free himself from the inner fascist to which he has willingly submitted.



Like *Gladiator*, *Fight Club* has the appearance of a liberal agenda, advocating a revolutionary fervor branded as rebellion against oppressive fascistic forces, but which actually masks an ideology similar to early forms of fascism. Both films are conservative in their attitudes toward racial and gender difference and are cynical about populism. Both source their opposition in the anger of underprivileged males, who feel they have been disenfranchised of their glorious futures by a vapid and ineffectual bourgeois, yet neither film demonstrates why these men deserve power. As in *Gladiator*, *Fight Club* portrays the same pining for simplicity—for an answer to life's complexities, sufferings, and disappointments that is as easy as swinging a sword or punching someone in the face. As Tyler's fascistic militia demonstrates, anxieties about contemporary life and meaning are simply annihilated by exhausting the body and silencing the mind; any potential conflicts in ideology between the men are elided by disallowing ideas to germinate. Spectacular violence, as in *Gladiator*, becomes the substitute for real political action. Although *Fight Club* is perhaps not as extensively indebted to particular movies as is *Gladiator*, in terms of its sarcasm, cynicism, paranoia, misogyny, and sardonic voiceover, it evidences ties to film noirs like *D.O.A.* (Maté, 1950) and *Sunset Blvd.* (Wilder, 1950). And with its focus on lower-middle-class disenfranchisement and an obsessive focus on the powerful potential of the heterosexual white male body it alludes to boxing films like *Rocky* (Avildsen, 1976) and *Raging Bull* (Scorsese, 1980), as well as militia movies like *First Blood*. In addition, it shares with *Gladiator* and other late twentieth-century blockbusters the practice of stylistically invoking politics and realism without connections to their complex machinations: spectacular violence replaces political dialogue and detailed physical grittiness substitutes for actual realism. In *Fight Club*, the heterosexual white male, betrayed by corporations and bureaucrats, can only restore his natural superiority via his body, which prevails even though it is pummeled, tortured, and wounded.

Fight Club begins with a literal silencing: Tyler Durden holds a gun inside the narrator's mouth and asks him to speak. The narrator comments, "With a gun barrel between your teeth, you speak only in vowels." Ironically, of course, he is holding the gun himself; his desire to be dominated and silenced is so great he has to create an imaginary alter-ego to do the job for him. Tyler's favorite words are "shut up" and the rules of Fight Club and Project Mayhem invoke silence, emphasizing it

by doubling it: "The first and second rules of Fight Club are that you do not talk about Fight Club. The first and second rules about Project Mayhem are that you do not ask questions about Project Mayhem." The narrator creates a world where there is no possibility of discussion and no need of it; everything is regimented and the few ideas necessary to run things are built into phrases that are repeated as difficult-to-forget mantras. At the hospital, the narrator sounds like an abused wife,



telling the doctor: "Fell down some stairs," and to the audience: "Sometimes Tyler spoke for me." Later, he notices "Tyler's words coming out of my mouth." When Darla asks him to talk to her, he repeats Tyler's command: "This conversation is over." In fact, Tyler forbids the narrator to speak to Darla about him, and the narrator tries hard not to think of her either, even when she

replaces his "inner animal"; it is a system based on repression. The narrator is a self-possessed somnambulist, like Cesare and Dr. Caligari rolled into one.²³

His insomnia comes from spiritual ennui and disappointment in his "tiny life" filled with material goods that signify nothing. He becomes addicted to submission, first finding the freedom of "losing all hope" with self-help groups and then replacing this with the freedom of losing all control with Tyler. He destroys his past and his identity upon Tyler's arrival and submits completely to the meaning Tyler creates. This experience, not only of submission, but the feeling of freedom through submission is a process required of fascism's political agenda. Hitler, in *Mein Kampf*, comments that the masses, by giving in to the strong man, engage in a complex game of denial:

They are equally unaware of their shameless terrorization and the hideous abuse of their human freedom, for they absolutely fail to suspect the inner insanity of the whole doctrine. All they see is the ruthless force and brutality of its calculated manifestations, to which they always submit in the end. (43)

Or, as the narrator points out: "Sooner or later, we all became what Tyler wanted us to be." This process is fundamental to fascist subjectivity, requiring a *méconnaissance* or misconstruction of the self in terms of an ideal other, and for the narrator, manifests itself in a literal misrecognition of Tyler Durden.²⁴ This submission is also portrayed in fascism and *Fight Club* in terms of the trope of a sleeper possessed. Mussolini notes that fascism "aims at refashioning not only the forms of life but their content" and realizing this requires "entering into the soul and ruling with undisputed sway" (18). For the "Fascist State is wide awake and has a will of its own" (38). But the men it inhabits must keep their own wills asleep, and thus insomnia becomes the metaphorical state of being. As the narrator observes: "With insomnia, nothing's real—everything's far away. Everything's a copy of a copy." In such a world myth holds sway over gritty reality, and individuals become copies of the strongest will.

Thus, with Tyler as model, there is no need for individuals; the army of space monkeys resembles the corporations they routinely plot against.²⁵ Dressed alike, thinking the same few words, and with no care or understanding for what people they may be affecting, they live up to their "corporate sponsorship."

Project Mayhem organizes and makes of the house a living organism; there are no names or identities, just rules and duty. The narrator is even fond of talking about himself as an organ in relation to the whole body: "I am Jack's complete lack of surprise," and "I am Jack's enflamed sense of rejection." And the men are a unified body, with cells capable of functioning completely on their own, as the narrator informs the police. The audience is never sure of the narrator's name because he uses different names at the self-help groups, and only Tyler Durden and Darla Singer have complete names until Bob dies and the mantra "His name is Robert Paulson" is born. This is the kind of liberty possible through complete anonymity and submission. As Tyler notes: "You are not special [...] you are the same decaying organic matter as everything else." Mussolini, in *The Doctrine of Fascism*, defines it thus:



Fascism stands for liberty, and for the only liberty worth having, the liberty of the State and of the individual within the State. The Fascist conception of the State is all-embracing; outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist, much less have value. Thus understood, Fascism, is totalitarian, and the Fascist State—a synthesis and a unit inclusive of all values—interprets, develops, and potentiates the whole life of a people. (14)

In *Fight Club*, the materialist ennui and the capitalist critique of the men have given rise to an abdication of self in support of Fight Club as a ruling body that will govern them absolutely and give their life meaning through its reproduction and success.

In much the same way, Tyler Durden's Fight Club values human life only insofar as it is (predominantly white) male, virile, aggressive, anonymous, anti-capitalist, and willing to become part of an elite group that has been reborn by means of cleansing violence. Fighting functions as another silencer. The narrator remarks, while listening to the murmur of his boss' words: "After fighting, everything else got the volume turned down." Fight Club offered a new hysterical language. The narrator remarks: "Fight Club wasn't about winning or losing. It wasn't about words. The hysterical shouting was in tongues—like at a Pentecostal church. When the fight was over, nothing was solved, but nothing mattered. Afterwards we all felt saved." This salvation, however, has more in common with the hysteria experienced in fascist rallies, where Hitler's voice subsumed his words into the language of power. Tyler, like Maximus, offers the fullness of pain and sacrifice, duty and submission: "Without pain. Without sacrifice you have nothing." The hysterical language of

their fighting also trumps the possibility of actual discourse or action. They wear the badge of their fighting with pride, and sport scars that look like vaginas on their hands; the pain of rebirth has freed them from women and the human cycle of life.²⁶ Their cocky attitudes are reminiscent of the fascist soldiers Mussolini describes: "I don't give a damn"—the proud motto of the fighting squads scrawled by a wounded man on his bandages" (27). Fascist soldiers also hinged their identity on the utter rejection of women, hardening their bodies and performing violent feats in order to avoid dissolution into the "feminine" forces surrounding them, as Klaus Theweleit demonstrates in *Male Fantasies*.²⁷ This is revealed in the narrator's brutal beating of Angel Face, whose almost feminine beauty he perceives as a threat. As Richard Dyer contends in *White*, the hard and violent male body also masters the masses: "The built body sees the body as submitted to and glorified by the planning and ambition of the mind; colonial worlds are likewise represented as inchoate terrain needing the skill, sense and vision of the coloniser to be brought to order" (165). This is most clearly expressed by Tyler's practice of making "human sacrifices," particularly his violent interrogation of an Asian convenience store worker, an act he confuses with enlightenment.²⁸ In



scenes like this, *Fight Club*, like *Gladiator*, reveals its agenda as a liberator of nations and "the people."

Marla, much like Lucilla in *Gladiator*, offers an alternative to single-minded submission, which the narrator knows but represses. She is equally entranced with self-destruction, as evidenced by her continued tolerance of his insanity and abuse. But she is dangerous because she engages in dialogue; the one person Tyler forbids him to talk to, she is the person who precipitates his realization of the insanity he has been perpetrating. She is also the person he sees as responsible for his psychic break; part of his retreat into Tyler is an inability to deal with women. He says to Tyler, "I can't get married, I'm a 30 year old boy." Tyler responds: "We're a generation of men raised by women. I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need." Which begs the question, of course, of which generation, exactly, was not raised by women? It is only once the narrator is able to accept his attraction to and need for Marla, that he is able to move toward confronting Tyler, which is to say, himself. In the final scene of the film, he fights with Tyler in an empty building, and begins to take control of the violence he has been directing outwards. He mentally takes the gun from Tyler's hand and places it in his own. Pointing it at himself he says, "Not my head, Tyler, our head. [...] I want you to really listen to me. My eyes are open." His shot comes out of the back of Tyler's



head, and he appears to have finally recognized and asserted his own voice. His men listen to him and he and Darla hold hands as the buildings around them crumble—ground zero for the narrator.

But this moment, like many in the film, is politically ineffectual because of its satirical distance from the crucial moment of potential insight. The narrator, his head bleeding from his self-inflicted wound, asks for gauze and says “it’s no problem [...] Trust me. Everything’s going to be fine.” But how can it be? As he and Darla



watch the buildings explode around them, the film’s words of reassurance appear as absurd as the gauze for his wound. It is as if the spectacle of violence, first between male bodies, and then with the phallic structures they have erected, is meant as an answer unto itself, a postmodern refusal of meaning. In *Fight Club*,

unlike in *Gladiator*, the cleverness of the film works in tandem with the spectacle of violence to skirt the issues it sometimes addresses sympathetically: the difficulty of living in a vacuous capitalist society, including the heinous jobs and the lack of meaningful social interactions such a system creates. The sly humor that invites a knowing audience to laugh at and with the characters too often gives way to a cycle of useless violence. When Tyler asks the narrator, early in the film: “How’s that working out for you: being clever?” he might as well be identifying a central discrepancy that is never satisfactorily resolved in the film. While Tyler is depicted as an anarchic individualist, he creates an utterly fascist and repressive system. His acts of rebellion, like splicing porno into family films, are adolescent and do not evolve away from a capitalist system; they merely throw a wrench in the works with a wry nod. Tyler’s subversion is a boy’s fantasy of comic-book violence and actions without consequence; it is as conservative a revolution as that portrayed in *Gladiator*. The destruction enacted all around him is the inevitable conclusion of the narrator’s lack of self-awareness, his *méconnaissance*, which he releases into the world at the end of the film, as the insertion of the final penis/phallus image suggests.

Though both *Fight Club* and *Gladiator* are set within clearly mythic frameworks—one literally in Rome, and the other in a world of white male fantasy—both also hold eerie significance for the contemporary political arena. In socio-political terms this means the immanent tracing of violent rivalry on the urban landscape, an event that looked very similar to the 9/11 world of New York in 2001. The dissatisfaction with liberal, democratic, “feminine” leadership typical of the late 1990s that was evidenced in *Gladiator* and *Fight Club* was of course soon manifested in a sea change of leadership in 2001. The *méconnaissance* of origins and identity evidenced in these two films was representative of a more general appreciation for domination and fascism that disguises itself as an appreciation for a radical “outsider” perspective. In fact, it is the lack of political engagement or critique in either film that enabled their immense popularity. In *Gladiator*, the film’s action focuses on the attempts of

an exile to reinstate a vision of imperial enlightenment that is being threatened by a weak dictator, while the narrator of *Fight Club* eschews the luxuries of contemporary urban life as signs of spiritual flaccidness and weakness of political vision. Both demonstrate a deceptively "new" masculinity that is tragically resistant to a dialogics of self, or of democracy, deliberation, reflection, and meaning, and instead assert, much like the fascist doctrine they so often mirror, that the male mind must remain locked in its fortress of pure unquestionable certainty in order to liberate the world from its imagined shackles.

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Notes

¹ The latest crisis of white masculinity reached a peak in the "politically correct" climate of the 1990s and its angst and paranoia has been variously theorized by a number of critics including Robyn Wiegman in *American Anatomies* and David Savran in *Taking It Like a Man*. See especially Henry Giroux's discussion of political disengagement and misogyny in *Fight Club* and Martin Fradley's discussion of masculinity, paranoia, and melodrama in *Gladiator*.

² "Blood and soil" (*Blut und Boden*) was a nationalist phrase that encapsulated the nostalgic romanticism for native (hence, non-Jewish) peasant life. It was popularized by Nazi R. Walther Darré (the Reich Minister of Food and Agriculture from 1933 until 1942) during the rise of German fascism in the 1920s and 1930s.

³ This phrase references Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler*, an enlightening analysis of Weimar and Nazi cinema, particularly the films *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Wiene, 1920) and *Triumph of the Will* (Riefenstahl, 1935).

⁴ Walter Benjamin makes this assertion briefly at the end of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility."

⁵ Griffin's characterization of fascism is as a self-described liberal theorist. For a variety of theories about fascism as a historical, political, and psychological phenomenon, see for example the general introduction to *The Routledge Companion to Fascism and the Far Right*, a variety of generic theories about political fascism including Roger Griffin's *The Nature of Fascism*, Dave Renton's *Fascism*, Roger Eatwell's *Fascism*, and George Mosse's *Masses and Man*, and socio-psychological approaches by Klaus Theweleit in *Male Fantasies* and Theodor Adorno in *The Authoritarian Personality*.

⁶ These characteristics of fascism are generally agreed upon by the theorists cited above. For the purposes of this essay, I am evaluating these characteristics specifically in terms of fascist discourse and aesthetics, but also at times in terms of political functioning.

⁷ See Griffin's *The Nature of Fascism*.

⁸ These nods to fascist aesthetics appear to be intentional, especially the reproduction of images from Leni Riefenstahl's documentary of a Nazi rally, which itself references the military parades from the Roman period *Gladiator* represents. For a discussion of fascist aesthetics, see for example, Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Susan Sontag's "Fascinating Fascism," and Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi's *Fascist Spectacle*; for fascism and film, see Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* and Eric Rentschler's *The Ministry of Illusion*.

⁹These films also connect back to the early spectacle films in terms of their use of the main characters as peplum heroes, including Maciste from *Cabiria* (Pastrone, 1914).

¹⁰Richard Dyar, in *White*, has argued that the Italian peplum movies between 1957-1965, while they explicitly eschewed fascism, implicitly revealed a desire for the fascist white male body, a desire growing from the increasing industrialization of the Italian population during the time period. See especially 165-80.

¹¹At the level of plot and character, *Gladiator*'s Maximus is similar to Judah Ben-Hur, as both men are sold into slavery from positions of power and plot revenge. Maximus is also similar to Livius in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*; they are both made heir to the Roman empire by Marcus Aurelius, both seek to avenge Aurelius's death, and are victorious in hand-to-hand combat with Commodus at the end of the films. *Spartacus* provides further parallels as both Spartacus and Maximus are forced to become gladiators and each fights to escape this system. Each film also introduces a fictional Senator Gracchus, who advocates for the Roman senate. *Gladiator* is also reminiscent of the plot of *Ursus*, in which Commodus, as the ruthless emperor of Rome, is opposed by Ursus who is forced to become a gladiator and eventually defeats Commodus in battle.

¹²See Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond* 146.

¹³For more on *Gladiator*'s questionable relationship to history, see "Gladiator and the Myths of Rome" by T. P. Wiseman.

¹⁴In case Commodus had incurred any sympathy in the film, he proves he is truly despicable by stabbing Maximus before their big fight.

¹⁵This is evidenced by the symbol of Italian fascism, the fasces.

¹⁶By contrast, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* is far more specific and complex in its development of how democracy might work within the imperialist ideal of "Rome." The key character in this is Timonides, a character absent in *Gladiator*. He identifies Rome as not only the "light" but also life, people, and warmth, and also tries to establish a democratic community by making the enslaved peoples into citizens of Rome—focusing on the problem of Roman oppression as Spartacus did—for which he is murdered by Roman soldiers.

¹⁷This is an example of unrepresentative populism; the people exist merely to add weight to the main individual's actions and decisions.

¹⁸In addition, Oliver Reed sadly passed away during the filming, and was replaced by a CGI mask and a body double.

¹⁹The fascist tyrant, while allowed to be irrational and perhaps insane, is not allowed to exhibit weakness or indecision.

²⁰The DVD packaging, for example, announces that *Gladiator* is "Spectacular" and "A Colossus of Rousing Action."

²¹*Gladiator* enacts the prejudice of the Roman elite, who in *Spartacus* insist that Spartacus is not just a slave because: "It pleases Roman vanity to think you are noble."

²²It is also reminiscent of the culture of neo-liberalism that Henry Giroux discusses in connection with *Fight Club* in his excellent essay "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders." While I agree that these films are fully inflected by neoliberal ideas, I also think they hark back to fascist culture both self-consciously and unconsciously.

²³ These are two characters from the expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, one a doctor at an insane asylum, and the other the sleepwalker the doctor tries to control.

²⁴ See Alan Sheridan's translation of Lacan's *Écrits*. He does not translate *méconnaissance* in order to allow it the fuller sense of "misconstruction" (or "misinterpretation") in addition to "misrecognition."

²⁵ Project Mayhem is represented as anti-capitalist (another similarity it shares with early fascism) and also anti-corporatist, but it sets itself up almost immediately as an alternate corporate entity.

²⁶ See Giroux's "Private Satisfaction and Public Disorders" for an extended discussion of *Fight Club* and feminized consumer culture.

²⁷ In *Male Fantasies*, Theweleit convincingly outlines a psychological-historical explanation of fascism that includes an extensive analysis of fascist soldiers' relationships to and fantasies about women (and what they consider to be feminine).

²⁸ These acts of harassment against "human sacrifices" are also similar to the fascist intimidation of Jewish shopkeepers and the vandalism of their stores, perceived of by the fascists as controlling international economics.

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