As an undergraduate at Purdue University, Jacob J. H. Warrington wrote the following argument about the film *Fight Club* for a film course. One of his goals was to draw from what others had written about consumerism and film interpretation as he built his argument that *Fight Club* is an effective critique of modern capitalism.

Consumerism as a Lifestyle, Commodification as Common Practice

Early in the film, as the narrator is describing the effects of his insomnia at work, we see a camera shot from the bottom of a trash can, pulling upward, while the narrator notes that the combination of deep space travel and corporate sponsorship will lead to realities of the “IBM Stellarsphere,” the “Microsoft Galaxy,” and “Planet Starbucks.” This sequence vividly describes commodification at work, developing a scenario of corporate giants capitalizing on what is not even accessible with our current technology. The camera motion itself becomes an analogue to the commentary: after the shot begins at the center of this trash can “universe,” the camera slides out, approaching the ends of the universe, capturing a gratuitous display of corporate logos as it travels. This general implication of growing corporate power is parallel to what Fredric Jameson described as “a network of power and control . . . difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third order of capital itself” (37). The scope of commodification is on display; it reveals the reach of a process...
Audience and Purpose
Who seems to be the audience for this paper? List the features that lead you to this conclusion. How would you describe the paper’s purpose?

where, as Dino Felluga puts it in his discussion of similar concepts in The Matrix, “the consumer product, itself defined by an involved commercial campaign, takes the place of ‘the real thing’” (76).

Whereas the trash can sequence provides a keen description of commodification, the following scene addresses equally well the lifestyle of consumerism. The narrator goes so far as to describe his motivation, saying “if I saw something clever, like a coffee table in the shape of a yin-yang, I had to have it,” adding “I’d flip through catalogs and wonder, ‘what kind of dining set defines me as a person?’” This is precisely the cry of the individual caught in consumerism, searching for self-realization in the pages of a quarterly catalog. Jameson notes in his work Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, that “what has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally” (4), and this suggests how the narrator is satisfied to search for, simply, “something clever,” purchasing these clever twists on true aesthetic work whenever possible.

In fact, Jameson adds, “The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche” (16). The Fight Club narrator’s practice of pastiche reflects in his addictively purchasing mass-produced décor based on hand-made creations of the past, or, in Jameson’s words, his “neutral practice of . . . mimicry” (17). Again exciting is how the film techniques used in the scene directly reflect this condition. We do not simply have a shot of furniture in a condominium, but rather a live-action catalog, with the narrator walking inside the advertisement itself. He is living inside a construct of commercial corporations: a furniture catalog, yes, but also consumerism itself. The scene uses this technique to provide ironic commentary, for while the narrator attempts to add commercial products to his home in order to individualize it, he only succeeds in making a more accurate copy of the mass-produced advertisements he orders from.

In several ways, the Ì¼rni catalog scene additionally demonstrates Slavoj Ìžiçek’s concept of “the world in which corporate Capital succeeded in penetrating and dominating the very fantasy-kernel of our being” (73). After the narrator says “we used to read pornography, now it was the ‘Horchow collection,’” we can re-view the beginning to the scene, with the narrator in the bathroom, as parallel to Ìžiçek’s description. As he sits on the toilet leafing through a catalog, we realize that this commercial tool has taken the place of what would have been pornographic fantasy. As he throws the Ì¼rni catalog down, and the camera pulls into a photo with the tagline “Use Your IMAGINATION . . .” we enter the narrator’s own fantasy-kernel, filled with kitschy furniture and advertising descriptions. Thus, Fight Club proves its world is very much the one that Ìžiçek considered.

As a final exploration of Fight Club’s early introduction to the theory of its postmodern world, one should consider the montage of the film’s narrator traveling on the job. The film introduces “the equation,” an algorithm using three variables to estimate settlement costs of faulty car parts. If the costs of settlement are lower than the cost to recall flawed cars, no recall is performed. The mechanic actually at work under this veil of corporate villainy is the reduction of
human life to a number—precisely, a dollar amount. The prevalence of this postmodern symptom is brought up in Felluga’s overview of exchange-value:

According to Karl Marx, the entrance into capitalist culture meant that we ceased to think of purchased goods in terms of use-value, in terms of the real uses to which an item will be put. Instead, everything began to be translated into how much it is worth, into what it can be exchanged for (its exchange-value). Once money became a “universal equivalent,” against which everything in our lives is measured, things lost their material reality (real-world uses, the sweat and tears of the laborer). We began even to think of our own lives in terms of money rather than in terms of the real things we hold in our hands: how much is my time worth? How does my conspicuous consumption define me as a person? (74, underlining added for emphasis)

In this sense, the understanding of life as a dollar amount is symptomatic of modern capitalist culture, similar to the effect of consumerism, wherein one’s worth is translated into the monetary values or those commodities they have purchased. Not surprisingly, this point is summed up nicely as the narrator reflects, in his skewed perspective, as he waits for his luggage in an airport terminal: “I had everything in that suitcase: my CK shirts, my DKNY shoes, my A|X ties . . . .”

Rise and Fall of Rebellion
After the film’s narrator has been introduced to the character of Tyler Durden, a soap salesman, projectionist, and so-called “guerrilla terrorist of the food service industry,” Fight Club provides viewers with a stance against consumerism. Primarily, we encounter Tyler’s rebellious acts: splicing pornography into children’s films, befouling banquet food with urine, etc. If he were asked the reasons for these choices, he could potentially quote the logic of Michel Foucault, who said “the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations, and the ‘agonism’ between power relations and the intransivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social existence” (218). Spouting catch phrases like “Self-improvement is masturbation,” Durden is a vigilante against corporate corruption, a sort of anti-hero for the disenfranchised.

The movie initially gives him latitude to convert mindless consumers with his appealing brand of misbehavior. When a police officer speaks with the narrator on the telephone about the explosion that destroyed his condominium, Tyler repeatedly interjects his spin:

NARRATOR. Who would go and do such a thing?
DETECTIVE. I’ll ask the questions.
TYLER. Reject the basic assumptions of civilization, especially the importance of material possessions! . . .
DETECTIVE. Have you recently made enemies with anyone who might have access to homemade dynamite?
NARRATOR. Enemies?
TYLER. Yes, it’s very serious. Look, no one takes this more seriously than me—that condo was my life!
Rhetorical Appeals
What kinds of appeals does the writer use—logos, ethos, pathos? Which appeal predominates?

Ok? I loved every stick of furniture in that place. That was not just a bunch of stuff that got destroyed. It was me!
DETECTIVE. Is this not a good time for you?
TYLER. Just tell him you f***ing did it! Tell him you blew it all up; that’s what he wants to hear. . . .

While the narrator still plays the part of the devoted consumer (“I loved every stick of furniture in that place. That was not just a bunch of stuff that got destroyed. It was me!”), we see that Tyler exerts influence on him. When the narrator realizes he is a suspect for the crime, he accepts Tyler’s pseudo-wisdom even more readily. Later, after we (and, concurrently, the narrator) realize that he did, in fact, destroy his own condominium, we might assume that the movie suggests this extreme rejection of consumer principles is a viable reaction to the rampant cultural commodification individuals face. When Tyler says we have become “slaves with white collars,” adding “advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate, so we can buy s*** we don’t need,” we want to believe his alternative will change it all.

However, Fight Club undercut this notion. Especially toward the end of the film, we see signs that Tyler Durden’s vision is not the perfect solution to all of postmodemism’s problems. First, we have Tyler’s “you are not your job” monologue. It echoes all of his previous condemnations of consumerism: “you are not how much money you have in the bank,” and “you are not your car.” At the end of the sequence, though, there is a strange occurrence. The frame blurs and shakes, and as it shifts, we can see around the film, noticing the edges of the frame, the reel tracks, and the light behind it. We are informed that, although Tyler speaks to us of shirking our reality of consumerism, it is through one branch of this reality, the mass media—the motion picture industry—that Tyler speaks to us. While he claims to be above and outside this realm of capitalist consumer concerns, he is, on the contrary, directly in the middle of it. It is essentially the same contradiction as in Linda Hutcheon’s discussion on metafiction, where she notes “it always works within conventions in order to subvert them” (5). Here, the film has chosen to make viewers aware of Tyler’s complicity with movie in order to question his reliability.

Further, as the development of Project Mayhem continues to expand the role of the “Fight Club” (this, the entity inside the movie), it becomes more apparent that Tyler Durden is unable to escape the ideology of consumerism. In Louis Althusser’s discussion on ideology, he is able to point out that although individuals may wish to be outside systems of ideology, this is an impossibility (246). His understanding of how one acts in contradiction to ideology—“As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only applies to others, never to oneself” (246)—is remarkably similar to how Tyler Durden treats the members of his Fight Club; while Tyler seeks to cure disillusioned men from “false consciousness” (borrowing a phrase from the Marxists), he is yet still caught in the commercial ideology himself.

So, what would Fight Club have us believe? Is there hope of escape from the lurking commodification of our culture? . . . Essentially, no; only awareness. Continuing with Althusser, the subjectivity of individuals is inherent: “Before its birth, the child is
therefore always already a subject, appointed as a subject in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected' once it has been conceived.” This trait subjects us to the ideologies of the culture in which we live. As Althusser summarizes, “I only wish to point out that you and I are always already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable, and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects” (245). In this context, we see that Fight Club admits we are all a part of the postmodern consumerist tradition, just as Tyler Durden remained a part, but it strives to make us aware of the condition. Although Althusser acknowledges the rarity with which individuals can consciously state “I am in ideology” (246), I argue this is precisely the conclusion Fight Club wants its viewers to reach. According to popular postmodern theory, though we might currently be unable to alter the ideological structures within which we live, awareness is a prerequisite of change. Although David Fincher’s Fight Club may not have all the answers, it certainly has the presence to lay bare some of the central issues of the postmodern condition. If viewers can read between the lines (or perhaps, more accurately, see between the frames), they will be able to learn a great deal more about the commodification of our culture and the ideology of consumerism than the majority of contemporary film has ever attempted to communicate.

Works Cited


