

# In/Security and Discursive Appropriation in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

---

*Serena  
Fusco*

---

*Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"*

*Space monkey, sign of the time, time  
Space monkey, so outta line, line  
Space monkey, sort of divine  
And he's mine, mine, all mine.  
(Patty Smith)*

*It's coming to America first,  
the cradle of the best and of the worst.  
It's here they got the range  
and the machinery for change  
and it's here they got the spiritual thirst.  
It's here the family's broken  
and it's here the lonely say  
that the heart has got to open  
in a fundamental way:  
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.  
(Leonard Cohen)*

## *Introduction*

While the conscience and sense of America's vulnerability, with its global implications, has exploded in all its enormity after the 9/11 attacks,

the redeployment of American security policies, parallel to the reorganization of international security, had been going on since at least the late 1980s, assuming more recognizable forms in the 1990s due to the most general sense of a “new world order” following the end of the Cold War. International discourse on security has been inevitably transformed as America has reinvented itself in the global context in different historical moments<sup>1</sup>. In this essay I shall attempt to demonstrate that Chuck Palahniuk’s cult novel *Fight Club* (1996) comments on global discourses on vulnerability and security, their variable scale, and how the variability of this scale illuminates spaces that are liminal to the political sphere – ironically questioning the very boundaries of *what* is political.

Through the concept of scale, I especially refer to how the discourse of threat and emancipation from threat is played across individual and communal levels. In *Fight Club*, discourses articulating vulnerability – its disempowering consequences, protective reactions against it, and also its empowering aspects – are produced in the subject by means of direct address; correspondingly, they are also claimed, disseminated, and appropriated across various communities and various layers of the public sphere. In my view, *Fight Club* comments on a shared sense of vulnerability historically emerging next to a crisis of responsibility. On the one hand, this crisis of responsibility can be interpreted as sliding towards dystopian nihilism and as a destruction of any possibility for creating a viable community. On the other hand, I maintain that the novel precisely comments on the construction of a community-in-insecurity: more specifically, on the unbalance and clash between different degrees of subjective responsibility in creating, preserving, and/or destroying a collectivity.

In what follows, firstly, I consider *Fight Club*’s construction of a fictional world predicated on a generalized sense of shared vulnerability, and explore how this sense results into a problematic re-appropriation of violence and the creation of a liminal community that challenges the mainstream. *Fight Club*’s liminal community is a system that works alternatively interrogating and distancing, humanizing and de-humanizing, identifying and un-identifying its members; the inclusiveness of this system is based on the capacity to relinquish empathy the way the mainstream knows it, and maybe create liminal (underground, or one might say “cult”?) forms of empathy.

Secondly, I move on to explore the “sociology of knowledge” behind the construction of *Fight Club*’s oppositional community, reflected in the

novel's narrative strategies and structure, and speculate on degrees of responsibility corresponding to various degrees of embeddedness and awareness on the part of the members of this collectivity. Both fight club as a community and the globalized American community that is challenged by the club's operations are predicated on a combination of emancipatory rhetoric (being free, exercising one's power) and strictly hierarchical structures of awareness and access to knowledge (you are only allowed to know, and do, that much). In both fight club as oppositional community and the broader community around it, I argue, threat and emancipation from threat are privatized, made into commodities, and expropriated in a grim, totalitarian public sphere. At the same time, by constructing fight club as a liminal community, the novel offers a possibility to break this cycle of appropriation, turning a scenario of vulnerability into a reflection on the political constituencies that endorse protection for certain subjects and exclude other subjects from the same protection.

### *Subjects and Contexts of In/Security*

To the very bones, the plot and structure of *Fight Club* are as follows:

A nameless narrator – a young man, apparently in his thirties – has a white-collar job in a big car company, and lives in a well-kept and stylish condo; despite his apparently well-rounded and successful life, he suffers from chronic insomnia and suffocates under a social imperative that makes him, and thousands like him, links in a compulsive chain of production and consumption: “[g]enerations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need” (Palahniuk, *Fight Club* 149)<sup>2</sup>. In order to find some degree of relief from his existential pain, the narrator begins to attend support groups for people with terminal diseases, and thereby meets Marla Singer, a bizarre outcast who entertains a similar relationship with reality and for whom he gradually develops a more-or-less covered sexual interest. After his condo is mysteriously blown up, he moves in with Tyler Durden, an obscure guy who lives in a semi-abandoned house and works as a part-time projectionist, waiter, and soap producer. Almost by chance, one night the narrator and Tyler initiate “fight club” – namely, a gathering of men who physically confront each other, two at a time, the fights going on for “as long as they have to” (50). Fight club is empowering to its members: “[a]fter a night in fight club,

everything in the real world gets the volume turned down. Nothing can piss you off" (49). Fight club grows prodigiously in the whole country and evolves into Project Mayhem (sic), a guerrilla terrorist organization managed by Tyler that sets out to trouble the corporate world that has created alienation for the so-called functional members of society and has attacked and undermined the masculinity of its men. In the second part of the novel, thanks to Marla, the narrator realizes that Tyler is a product of his own twisted mind. Tyler is revealed to be the narrator's alter ego, taking over his body when he falls asleep. Not buying into the extremist development of Tyler's agenda, the narrator attempts to undo Project Mayhem and protect Marla, whom he believes to be in danger. In a final confrontation on top of the "Parker-Morris Building", the narrator and his alter ego confront each other and, in order to stop "Tyler", the narrator shoots himself. The enigmatic epilogue suggests that he has not died and has instead become a patient in a mental institution. In his post-trauma, he believes he is in heaven and wants to go back to the world of the living – who, in turn, want "Tyler" back.

The novel is told by the nameless narrator and interspersed, as we shall see, with other voices. Referring to the style employed, Palahniuk himself describes it as follows: "jump[ing] ... from scene to scene ... a mosaic of different moments and details. Giving them all a continuity and yet showcasing each moment by not ramming it up against the next moment" (Palahniuk, Afterword 213).

A sense of mounting chaos and vulnerability, which involves living under a number of impending threats, the forms assumed by these threats, and the responses to them constitute in many ways the cultural horizon of the novel, and are among the novel's main thematic concerns. Diffused vulnerability spans from individual to global concerns – from the body, illness, masculine integrity, to the nation, the environment, the earth itself. This obviously responds to a broad, typically postmodern global loss of references, and a growing sense of fragmentation and alienation accompanying the end of the "grand narratives" or "metanarratives" that characterized modernity<sup>3</sup>. The novel opens with what would subsequently become a paradigmatically apocalyptic scene: the tower of the "Parker-Morris building" is about to collapse, bombed in its foundations, and the nameless narrator is facing Tyler, his mentor in rebellion, who holds a gun in the narrator's mouth. Awaiting the explosion, the two are locked in a cinematic confrontation, about to sacrifice themselves and enter "eternal

life” (11)<sup>4</sup>. In the shadow of the impending apocalypse, and in the “three minutes” (15) leading to it, the nameless narrator “remember[s] everything” (ibid.) and the story begins to unfold in retrospective.

This apocalyptic scenario is the one that most obviously resonates with *a posteriori* implications of 9/11. It has been repeatedly noted that, in the ineludible shadow of an event so charged with emotional bearing as the attacks of 9/11, practically all texts presenting scenarios of terror, including *Fight Club*, become charged with a power of prescience (Petersen). If, on the other hand, we make an effort to restrict our frame of reference to the 1990s, and to the self-perception and perception of the U.S. in the global context during the pre-9/11 decade, a text such as Palahniuk’s still resonates with a profound cultural shift - also reflected in other texts, such as Don De Lillo’s *Mao II* and *Underworld*: “the shift from *secure* paranoia of the Cold War to the *insecure* paranoia of a postnational age in which everything is connected” (Knight 193-94).

After this apocalyptic intro, chapter two portrays incoming death, and an overall realization of vulnerability, as suspended between empathic identification and distance. The narrator’s alienation from the trap of his white-collar job and from his life as a consumer of commodities – a life that is frightfully perfect, and because of that curbing and ultimately castrating – manifests itself in the form of insomnia: “[e]verything 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” (21). Chapter two follows the narrator attending various support groups for people with terminal diseases. Attendance of these groups appears to him as the only way to empathize with fellow-humans: “it’s easy to cry when you realize that everyone you love will reject you or die” (17). “ ‘It will be alright,’ Bob says. ‘You cry now.’ ” (16). The narrator’s rediscovered sense of vulnerability is what offers him an escape from the isolation and unreality that characterize his life: “after a support group, I felt more alive than I’d ever felt” (22). This also applies to Marla: “[Marla] never dreamed she could feel so marvelous. She actually felt alive. [...] All her life, she never saw a dead person. There was no real sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with” (38). Neither the narrator nor Marla, whom he immediately recognizes as a fellow-faker, would, strictly speaking, be entitled to enter this community of the terminally diseased. Nonetheless, they seek solace from attending the groups and feel entitled to belong to a community racing towards death because they belong to the same chain of alien-

ating consumption, albeit in different positions. The narrator's stance is actually extremely ambiguous, suspended as it is between empathic identification and distancing due to the fact that he is not, strictly speaking, ill (and neither is Marla). According to Alex E. Blazer, the narrator is a fetishist in his approach to the people in the support groups, just like he is a fetishist in his relation to the consumer goods against which he has for a long time defined himself: "he is still invested in his life of deadly goods despite its pathological ramifications. When stuff no longer fills him up, dying people do" (Blazer 185). On the other hand, the narrator discriminates among the ghastly presences around him. While everybody speeds, inevitably, towards death, not everyone does it in the same way: "Okay in that brainy brain-food philosophy way, we're all dying, but Marla isn't dying the way Chloe was dying" (37). The novel apparently suggests that the chain of alienating consumption is both shared and not the same for everyone. In other words, despite generalized vulnerability, different forms and levels of vulnerability, insecurity, and pain exist.

While illness threatens survival in its barest form, the novel also describes threats that are both more culturally specific and more collective. After the nameless narrator has "met" his alter ego Tyler and they have initiated fight club, the forces that threaten human survival are played out at increasingly communal levels: "[f]or 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" (104). "Recycling and speed-limits are bullshit. They're like someone who quits smoking on his deathbed" (125).

With its gruesome evocation of waste, dumpsters, toxicity, and environmental defilement, the novel heavily plays on global dimensions of insecurity and vulnerability. Ironically reversed, those threats turn into empowerment strategies and weapons in the hands of Tyler and his followers. Bacteria and illness, an almost inevitable byproduct of the healthcare system, are appropriated by those who can use them: "I asked the doctor where could we get our hands on some of these hepatitis bugs, and he's drunk enough to laugh. [...] Everything goes to the medical waste dump, he says" (85). Becoming aware of the fundamental vulnerability of each individual becomes the indispensable starting point of Tyler's project: "[s]omeday you will die and, until you know that, you're useless to me" (76).

Economic insecurity and a job market that is unable to provide for the opportunities that are an essential component of the American Dream

form another good portion of the novel's backdrop: "[d]on't think of this as rejection. Think of this as downsizing" (113). Economic insecurity also threatens human survival in its barest forms – for instance, through denial of care for those who do not have access to the corporate health system. Marla does not have a health insurance, and ends up in

a clinic where slumped scarecrow mothers sat in plastic chairs [...] The children were sunken and dark around their eyes [...] and the mother scratched at mats of dandruff from scalp yeast infections out of control (108).

The novel darkly prophesies that social inequality might return with a vengeance and terrorize a corporate world that depends on it without acknowledging so:

The people you try to step on, we're everyone you depend on. We're the people who do your laundry and cook your food and serve you dinner. We make your bed. We guard you while you're asleep. We drive the ambulances. We direct your call. [...] We process your insurance claims and credit card charges. We control every part of your life. We are the middle children of history. [...] And we're just learning this fact [...]. So don't fuck with us" (166).

What do issues as various as the ones just mentioned have to do with an umbrella-concept as broad as "security" – and how does this concept contribute to contextualize *Fight Club* in the episteme of the 1990s? From the 1990s onwards<sup>5</sup> the purview of security – that is, the individuation of threats, their management, and the development of a discourse aimed at their removal – has expanded, both in the U.S. and globally. For instance, as noted by Peter Andreas and Richard Price, increasingly after the end of the Cold War, the American national security apparatus has been massively redeployed and used in handling issues that are both more limited and broader than State-level ones: from the late 1980s on there has been "an outward expansion of the portfolio of national security from previous internal policing domains, and the deployment of the external military apparatus for 'operations other than war', involving a variety of international policing missions" (Andreas and Price 31). Security and protection as perceived imperatives and diffused discourses, and the very idea of security, have massively moved away from being exclusively centered on intrastate conflicts and on the State as the ultimate subject and the privi-

leged organizational structure enforcing security. If the State was previously envisioned as the principal guarantor of its citizens' safety, entitled to protect them from external threats, scholars have subsequently challenged this view. It has been argued that the State simply cannot be the ultimate frame of reference for policies that have much broader implications and for threats that have a global impact. Moreover, as presently remarked, a number of threats are increasingly listed under security concerns that call for a joint action and collaboration among states and various other political entities. Among these concerns are environmental risks, unequal development and consequent economic insecurity, the management of health threats, and domestic and international terrorism. This is a scenario that intertwines with what Emma Rothschild has called "horizontally" and "vertically" extended conceptions of security. In a vertically-extended conception of security, security as an ideal condition is seen as the very root of human emancipation, and is a matter that is relevant to the human global community *and* the individual. In a horizontally-extended conception of security, protection, a traditionally military concern, is extended to the "civilian" fields of the political, social, and environmental<sup>6</sup>. In this context of extension, the U.S. play a pivotal role as the hegemonic force on the international stage after the end of the Cold War. Within this context, I find especially meaningful that a novel such as *Fight Club* reflects many of the concerns of post-Cold War discourses on security: from poverty and social unrest to environmental issues, from health to travel safety to terrorism.

The aforementioned extension implies, I would suggest, that the predicament of security, especially as it has been discussed from the 1990s on, cuts across several levels of subjectivization: protection is exercised by various collective subjects, and it is both the condition and the consequence of the emancipation of private individuals. Moreover, especially from the 1990s on, parallel to its enlargement, security has been an increasingly contested concept, and this inevitably interrogates both the constituency of the political and the nature of subjectivity. The very idea of a "subject of security" is fraught with contradictions. The 1990s are increasingly the decade when there is growing, global agreement that security is important, but what is the subject itself of security is contested. As noted by R. B. J. Walker, the "difficulties of analyzing the meaning of security [...] [largely] derive from [...] its derivation from a prior account of who or what is to be secured" (Walker 68, my emphasis). Not all sub-

jects are entitled to political status in the same way: consequently, not all subjects are comprised in the terms in which we reflect on security. Scholars in Critical Security Studies have argued that the main concern of any reflection on security, insecurity, and threat should be a politically situated interrogation of which subjects are protected and for what reasons, because neither all individuals nor all communities are immediately subsumed under the umbrella of the political<sup>7</sup>.

It is my contention that Palahniuk's *Fight Club* might also be read as a novel that comments on a generalized, yet simultaneously diversified vulnerability, and on the crisis of reference as to who is entitled to security, and which entities are responsible for safeguarding security, precisely through problematically linking two levels – the communal and the individual. While *Fight Club* mirrors coeval security concerns – from the individual to the global – at a thematic level, it also reproduces an interrogation of subjectivity (its extension and its limits) with relation to a political constituency. This interrogation is one of the key features of a critical reflection on vulnerability and in/security<sup>8</sup>. What is secured, and under what conditions? Why should it be? What implications does this bear? The aforementioned reflections urge me to interrogate community and its construction in the novel, and how this construction bears, in turn, on discourses on vulnerability and in/security – and to what extent, correspondingly, vulnerability and in/security become, in *Fight Club*, keywords for reflecting *politically* on the construction of a collectivity and the role of the individual in it: “[m]odern accounts of security are precisely about subjectivity, subjection, and the conditions under which we have been constructed as subjects subjected to subjection. They tell us who we must be” (Walker 71).

#### *De-Individualization, Community, Public and Private Violence*

*Fight club* is, in many ways, a novel about the very construction of a community, and, correspondingly, a reflection on collectivity. Scholars have repeatedly focused their attention on the misogynist, hyper-masculine character of this collectivity, in some cases intertwining this reflection with one on its anti-democratic, fundamentally totalitarian character. *Fight club* as community and its later development, *Project Mayhem*, have especially been discussed by scholars and critics who have written on Fincher's filmic version, reading it next to other films – especially from

the Reagan years – celebrating the tradition of the violent hero, advocate of self-made justice, “reclaiming American pride and masculine prowess” (Barker 173)<sup>9</sup>. *Fight Club* members, all men, mostly but not exclusively white, gather around Tyler Durden, and the rhetorical structure of this gathering is provided by the rules that are repeated like a mantra at the opening of each fight club meeting. Palahniuk writes that, culturally speaking, the novel filled a gap, providing, at a time when the book market was mostly occupied by works offering new models of social bonding and solidarity for women, “a new social model for men to share their lives” (Palahniuk, Afterword 214).

In their variety and diversity, critical responses to *Fight Club* – to Palahniuk’s novel, but also and especially to David Fincher’s cinematic rendition, that has in turn made the novel and Palahniuk himself into pop cult icons – bespeak, one might argue, both its liberating and its oppressive potential. They also bespeak the difficulty, and the urge, to pinpoint Tyler’s political stance. Is Tyler a revolutionary? An anarchist? A fascist? Is he a liberator of the oppressed, or is he an oppressor? Where is he to be located in the political spectrum? Generally speaking, readings can be divided between those who see *Fight Club* (both the novel and the film) as the expression of a totalitarian, repressive, and fundamentally regressive political view and those who see it as liberating and iconoclastic – albeit not necessarily politically progressive or constructive. In Peter Mathews’s words, the “bulk of the criticism has [...] centered on whether Tyler Durden is a positive or negative role model, particularly in the light of the political statements that issue from his mouth” (Mathews 82). The aforementioned simultaneous difficulty and urge to locate Tyler’s stance politically<sup>10</sup> also bespeaks the necessity to discriminate, as Judith Butler would say, between identifications that grant authority and identifications that hinder being heard in the public sphere. To many, Tyler’s voice may be a seductive but ultimately “uninhabitable identification” (Butler xix), embodying a self-destructive style that cannot result into any articulable political project shared by a collectivity. In this sense, the end of the novel is in itself ambiguous. Tyler disappears from the world when the nameless narrator’s extreme solution “kills” him, but, in a messianic expectation, his people wait for his return. When the narrator finds himself in what looks like a psychiatric hospital after shooting himself in his attempt to kill his alter ego, he is surrounded by signs that the cult of fight club is not over – only postponed:

Because every once in a while, somebody brings me my lunch tray and my meds and he has a black eye or his forehead is swollen with stitches, and he says: “We miss you Mr. Durden”.

Or somebody with a broken nose pushes a mop past me and whispers:

“Everything’s going according to the plan.” [...]

“We look forward to getting you back.” (208)

The creation of a community in *Fight Club* is accompanied by extreme experiences that border on de-individualization, on collectivization as an obliteration of self – a move that can be easily seen as profoundly totalitarian, especially in the context of American culture – one that notoriously values individualism. In the terms of one of Tyler’s followers – members of “Project Mayhem”, called by the narrator “space monkeys”:

“You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile.”

The space monkey continues, “Our culture has made us all the same. No one is truly white or black or rich, anymore. We all want the same. Individually, we are nothing.” (134)

Lynn M. Ta and Jennifer Barker discuss Fincher’s film version of *Fight Club*, pointing out the repressive quality of a project that is only empowering to Tyler, fight club fighters, and members of Project Mayhem: in the end, Ta argues, they replicate the same oppressive structure that they discern and criticize in corporate capitalism. According to Jennifer Barker, *Fight Club* portrays “a system based on repression” (Barker 180). After the narrator has realized that he is Tyler, he attempts to invest Tyler’s authority for canceling both fight club and Project Mayhem, but he is confronted by a compact group of men and a voice reading out the legendary rules, and he is mercilessly evicted from the venue where the men have gathered. His attempt at re-enacting control and authority clashes with anonymity: “I’m not leaving. I’m not giving up. [...] I’m in control here. [...] Evict fight club member, now!” (180). One member comes to the point of believing that Tyler has made himself into “homework” – an exemplification of how the project works. Despite the iconic, legendary status of Tyler as the founder of fight club, Tyler’s rules are increasingly depersonalized as the project develops, and the founder seriously risks becoming – according to a collectivized mechanism of ret-

tribution echoing Maximilien de Robespierre's fate in the French Revolution<sup>11</sup> – the illustrious victim of the system he has set in motion. The iron discipline he encounters in the murderous Project Mayhem members is, allegedly, not specifically addressed to him – it is the ecumenical grip directed at any anonymous infringer of the law: “[n]othing personal, Mr Durden” (188). The torture he is subjected to is the terror of physical emasculation, the threat of having his testicles cut off (187-91), replicating the occasion when Tyler had orchestrated this very torture for another illustrious victim, the Seattle Police Commissioner (164-66).

Critical reactions to *Fight Club*, just like to a number of other controversial texts of the late 1980s and early-mid 1990s<sup>12</sup>, partly indict it (both the novel and Fincher's film) as an encouragement to gratuitous violence<sup>13</sup>. Mark Seltzer has discussed America's “wound culture” as one in which “death is the theater for the living” (Seltzer 22) – one in which, in other words, *it is the public sphere itself that is seen as pathological*: “the very idea of ‘the public’ has become inseparable from spectacles of bodily and mass violence” (Seltzer 21). *Fight Club* intensely draws on this logic. Among Tyler's objectives is to aestheticize violence, make it iconic: “[t]his isn't really death [...] We'll be a legend” (11); “[a] real opera of a death” (203).

Per Serritslev Petersen reads *Fight Club* (next to Bret Easton Ellis's *Glamorama*) as a “terrorist pretext”, in the sense that *Fight Club* embodies a typified American terrorist imagery that would be, he argues, exploited by 9/11 terrorists in their recreation of terrorism as spectacle. To a certain extent, Petersen seems to suggest that a text such as *Fight Club* might “literally” be a *pretext*, bearing some degree of “responsibility” in the light of the tragic events that would follow. This responsibility would reside in the rhetoric realm, the realm not only of imagination but of the use of imagery, if this conflation of a moral/legal field with a rhetoric one can ever make sense. This perspective interestingly echoes and reverses Palahniuk's own. In the afterword to the UK edition of *Fight Club*, the author raises and – maybe hastily – dismisses the issue of accountability in the public sphere:

Once, a friend worried these stories might prompt people to copycat, and I insisted that we were just blue-collar nobodies living in Oregon with public school educations. There was nothing we could imagine that a million people weren't already doing (Palahniuk, Afterword 215).<sup>14</sup>

*Extreme Measures: Addressing You*

“It’s what you don’t know that matters most.”  
(Victor Ward in Bret Easton Ellis’s *Glamorama*)

In the previous paragraph I have discussed Palahniuk’s novel as a problematic reflection on community building, one that stretches the boundaries and limits of how a speaking position can/should be in order to assume authority in the public sphere, and what the consequences of this assumption might be. *Fight Club* conjures up this reflection by means of a strategy of depersonalization that can be seen as “totalitarian”. In this paragraph, I shall elaborate on this and argue that the text also presents a parallel streak of valorization of the individual, or *address*. In a sense, the whole novel, with its structure of narrative personae, amounts to a structure of address, or interrogation. In terms of narrative voice, *Fight Club* oscillates between first and second personhood. While the novel is ostensibly told in the first person by the nameless narrator, on several occasions this voice performs an address through the second-person “you”.

On the one hand, the “you” expresses an estrangement of the narrator from himself<sup>15</sup> – justifiable, in diegetic terms, if one takes into account the distance he experiences with relation to all events – especially in the first part of the novel, due to his insomnia. On the other hand, if this is (as repeatedly underlined) an expression of (pathological) alienation and removal from human feelings, this distance is also a way to handle vulnerability. “You” emerges at the moment of trauma and unbearable pain. The scene where Tyler pours lye on the narrator’s hand, painfully branding him for life, is in this sense emblematic. Second personhood intervenes, like a voice-over in guided meditation, creating a distance between the conscience and the pain:

Guided meditation works for cancer, it can work for this.

“Look at your hand”, Tyler says.

Don’t look at your hand.

Don’t think of the word *searing* or *flesh* or *tissue* or *charred*.

Don’t hear yourself cry. (75)

While it expresses and simultaneously creates distance, the “you” is the sign of a need for proximity, a call for an experience that vanquishes alienation: “[d]on’t shut this out,” Tyler says, calling the narrator back to

his painful experience exactly when he is attempting to master it by virtue of removal (75). Especially in chapter two, the “you” also creates a bond between the alienated (male) subject, his emotion, and his peers. The “you” shadows and reproduces, in the narrative frame, the outreach of empathy in a numb, dead world, the outreach the narrator seems to be after in order to overcome the white-collar alienation that is to him a prefiguration of death.

On the contrary, and reversing this logic of empathy, when the “you” becomes completely “other”, it can be appropriated. “You” becomes objectified in death and the possibility of empathy is foreclosed for good: “the amazing miracle of death. One minute, you’re a person, the next minute, you’re an object” (153). In a paradigmatically terrorist nightmare, “you” is a potential target, and anyone might become a “homework assignment” (187) for a member of Project Mayhem: “Tyler said the goal of Project Mayhem had nothing to do with other people. Tyler didn’t care if other people got hurt or not” (122).

As demonstrated by the previous examples, second personhood works by simultaneously involving and distancing. The narrative “you” creates bonds and unbinds. If, at the beginning of the novel, the narrator’s recipe against alienation and vulnerability is a search for human empathy through a sense of shared vulnerability, Tyler’s invention of fight club first and Project Mayhem afterwards builds up an empathy that is based on a sense of shared vulnerability turned against itself, until empathy in the compassionate sense is no more, and a different form of empathy and mutual protection emerges – one that I would refer to as answering a “cult” logic, at the border between restricted circles and mainstream society. “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” (122; my emphasis). How potentially expansive is that “we”?

This cult logic is mirrored by a specific form of passing on knowledge – one that consists in how-to-instructions, “stuff [that] isn’t in any history book” (13). While this kind of information – including, for instance, instructions for preparing homemade explosives – is “not in the history books”, it circulates in the “cult” societal formations that stretch the borders of the political. The passing on of information in *Fight Club* is a fundamental locus of confrontation and negotiation for the community. The “you” who is the recipient of lists and instructions can be potentially extended without limits – a possibility reflected in the Xeroxed copies of

fight club rules made by the narrator. The novel's style replicates this logics of cult extension in several passages, not only through its do-it lists but also through "philosophical" ready-made aphorisms, Tyler's favorite mode of enunciation, replicated by his followers: "[t]he mechanic starts talking, and it's pure Tyler Durden" (149).

In the central part of the novel, knowledge and discursive power are more and more appropriated by Tyler. A sharp division is established between Tyler, who "knows", and those who have something we might define "partial knowledge" and act regardless. Tyler asks for loyalty, and his role is that of a vehicle of empowerment asking his disciples to act responsibly on limited information: "the rule in Project Mayhem is you have to trust Tyler" (130). As Project Mayhem gains momentum, its members are asked to be fully responsible for a tiny extent of communal construction, while simultaneously they must limit their scope of accountability, awareness, and responsibility to that small, unrelated extent:

You do the little job you're trained to do.

Pull a lever.

Push a button.

You don't understand any of it, and then you just die. (12)

They all know what to do. It's part of Project Mayhem. No one guy understands the whole plan, but each guy is trained to do one simple task perfectly. (130)

The confrontation that emerges in the last part of the novel between the narrator and Tyler reflects a sociopolitical condition in which the transmission/blockage or the dosage of narrative information is essential. Tyler's "political" appeal becomes more and more distanced and ironically framed as the narrator realizes that he is Tyler and attempts to master him(self). Simultaneously, the narrator gradually rises to Tyler's level of awareness, to his knowledge: "I know this because Tyler knows this" (12, 26, 112, 185, 203). The confrontation between the two also appears to be one around knowledge and its social uses. The personality split can be seen as allegorizing a crisis of responsibility: while the narrator observes that everybody do their little job without really understanding much of it (12, 193), he simultaneously claims full responsibility for his actions: "the world is going crazy ... And I'm responsible for it all" (193). In my view, the personality split portrayed in the novel allegorizes, to some extent, a system that ascribes full accountability to the individual, while denying

her/him access to full information, offering just “tiny”, “single serving” (using the novel’s terms) information in the form of do-it lists.

Against the backdrop of vulnerability and generalized insecurity I have discussed in the first paragraph, the simultaneous evocation, so to speak, of the individual side of security handling can be ironic but is, in this frame of individual address, highly significant. The perception of vulnerability, security, and insecurity is by nature subjective. As such, it stems from the condition of not knowing enough, or, in some cases, knowing too much. Vulnerability as the state of being in/insecure is related to the handling and dosage of information – determining what should be made public and what should not, what should be concealed and what, on the contrary, should be shared. An ironic echo of this is to be found in the novel’s description of a highly individualized form of safety – flight safety. The narrator flies a lot for professional reasons, and on one of his flights he observes an airline safety card:

Life insurance pays off triple if you die on a business trip. I prayed for wind shear effect. I prayed for pelicans sucked into the turbines and loose bolts and ice on the wings. [...] I prayed for a crash. [...]

I study the people on the laminated airline seat card. A woman floats in the ocean, her brown air spread out behind her, her seat cushion clutched to her chest. The eyes are wide open, but the woman doesn’t smile or frown. In another picture, people calm as Hindu cows reach up from their seats toward oxygen masks sprung out of the ceiling.

This must be an emergency.

Oh.

We’ve lost cabin pressure. (26)

The issue of vulnerability and the handling of security as paradoxically and significantly suspended between public and private emerge in the narrator’s job. The narrator works as a “Recall Campaign Coordinator” for a car company. His position consists in assessing the costs of court settlements in case of incidents caused by defective vehicles versus the cost of recalling defective vehicles:

I’ll be there to apply the formula. I’ll keep the secret intact. [...]

$A$  times  $B$  times  $C$  equals  $X$ . [...]

If  $X$  is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt.

If  $X$  is less than the cost of a recall, then we don’t recall.

Everywhere I go, there's the burned-up wadded-up shell of a car waiting for me. I know where all the skeletons are. Consider this my job security. (30-31)

As it has been noted by several critics, this passage shows how authentic human security is disregarded in favor of a calculated, covered, cynical view of benefits versus losses for the sake of capital. In this context, a widespread threat is provided by corporate capitalism as such, with its imperative of compulsive commodity consumption. On the other hand, I would like to emphasize that “keeping the secret intact” reduces security handling to a private issue and silently involves the individual through a disguised address to “you”. While not revealing full information for the sake of profit, the narrator’s company indirectly invests (just like airlines in printing laminated safety cards) individuals with direct, cynical responsibility for handling risk.

It seems to me that the subject of in/security and vulnerability is located somewhere between being protected by someone else and becoming the active agent of one’s protection, and the reason for this is the fact that in/security and vulnerability inevitably oscillate between individual and communal dimensions. We have already seen that an interrogation of the idea of security also interrogates the constituency of the political and the nature of subjectivity. R.B.J. Walker notes that theorizations of security (especially dominant ones) are often predicated on a “prior understanding of what we mean by the political” (Walker 68). While discourses on security have been enlarged to a global dimension, they are also, in my opinion, increasingly “rooted in the subject” – increasingly articulated at the level of the individual. This rooting in the subject is manifold. At one level, it certainly bespeaks the increasing bio-political control<sup>16</sup> on the individual exercised in the name of national/global security, and engenders all the preoccupations related to this increased control. On the other hand, it also draws on the idea that security (and lack thereof) is a subjective, lived, experienced condition, and that to be secure means to be in the condition to exercise one’s individual prerogatives with no hindrances or anxieties – almost a matter of individual freedom. To paraphrase the narrator of *Fight Club*, the skeletons stay buried, and the secret is kept intact.

Henry Giroux’s approach to *Fight Club* is relevant here. Giroux has offered a powerful and highly influential critique of the film version of *Fight Club*<sup>17</sup>. I find especially relevant how Giroux’s argument links individualism and totalitarianism. He stresses *choice* in *Fight Club* – choice as

individual, privatized, depoliticized – as the key to a “fake” rebellion staged by the film. This rebellion is, according to Giroux, inauthentic, exactly because it pertains to the realm of the individual, and is antidemocratic in its core – mirror to a historical period, he maintains, that combines a cult for the individual with a political apparatus that is increasingly pervasive and repressive.

While Giroux has, in my view, a powerful insight here, I would follow up with a question: must a foregrounding of individual free will and choice inevitably be seen as the expression of a privatized, depoliticized sense of self? Correspondingly, must, for instance, the representation of violence and in/security in *Fight Club* be seen either as the cipher of a pathological public sphere *or* as an expression of privatized individualism? Or can the representation of violence and in/security in Palahniuk’s novel, suspended as it is between private and public, individual and collective dimensions, be of any consequence for a reflection on different modes of subjectivization, and how they relate to the construction of collectivities? Judith Butler’s reflection seems to point in this direction when she observes that “one can even experience [...] abhorrence, mourning, anxiety, and fear, and have all of these emotional dispositions [...] endeavor to produce another public culture and another public policy in which suffering unexpected violence and loss and reactive aggression are not accepted as the norm of political life” (Butler xiv). In Butler’s discourse, not only anxiety and fear, hence a sense of vulnerability and a lack of security, should become pretexts of critical political reflection, but the very cycle connecting a breach of security, aggression, and the entitlement to retaliate appears to be a political construction, not mere private violence that is not worth discussing. To my mind, it is exactly this oscillation between public and private discourses that appears to be significant<sup>18</sup>. To a certain extent, Giroux’s discussion of *Fight Club* paradoxically stresses this significance in linking individual choice to a political context – political, that is, to the extent that it entails a re-articulation of individualism versus a problematic enlargement (and not a shrinkage) of the public sphere.



- 1 As a seminal reference study that tackles post-Cold War developments of the concept of security, see Rothschild. One initial question to keep in mind when confronting the concept of security would be: due the centrality of America within discourses that revolve around security as an issue of global scope, to what extent is the reinvention of global vulnerability and search for global protection America-inflected?  
This is not to say that America is the force behind all post-1980s discourses on security: on the other hand, America is an increasingly globalized subject of discourse and style of discourse, and in that sense the world is heavily Americanized – and the discourse of security does not constitute an exception.
- 2 The novel was originally published in the U.S. in 1996. The edition I shall quote from was published in the UK in 2006 with an afterword by the author. From now on, references to this edition of the novel will be included parenthetically in the text.
- 3 See Lyotard.
- 4 Being held at gunpoint does not make the situation look as self-sacrifice for the anonymous narrator, unless one keeps in mind that the narrator and Tyler are actually the same person.
- 5 See Andreas and Price; Rothschild; Krause and Williams; Buzan and Hansen; Williams; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams.
- 6 See Rothschild.
- 7 See Walker.
- 8 See Walker.
- 9 Barker refers to Robin Wood, engaging her as follows: “Wood [...] 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 ego as oppositional to a fascistic or totalitarian system, their plot belies a fundamentally conservative adventure narrative” (Barker 173).
- 10 This reflects an urge to locate the novel itself politically, in many respects overlapping Tyler’s statements and the ideology behind the book. According to this view, Tyler’s statements would reflect the author’s political stance.
- 11 The French Revolution is openly referred to in the novel (19-20).

- 12 Among these controversial works I would list Bret Easton Ellis’s novel *American Psycho* and films such as Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* and Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers*.
- 13 See Ta.
- 14 Slavoj Žižek’s has performed a Lacanian reading of *Fight Club* across several of his works (see Žižek 2002, 2003, and 2004), pointing its “extreme” potential for a reflection on political change. Petersen refers to Žižek when he points out the eerie, spectacular *and déjà-vu* quality of the 9/11 attacks (a perception to which, in his view, *Fight Club* itself contributes) and how this (paradoxically, in my view) pairs with a “passion for the real” (Žižek reading Alain Badiou) that places authenticity in acts of violent transgression.
- 15 Second personhood may be seen as suggesting the presence of Tyler as a veiled second narrator from the very beginning.
- 16 The concepts of “biopolitics” and “biopower” have their roots in Michel Foucault’s work. They have become key concepts in the philosophical debate of the late twentieth century, and have been appropriated and elaborated by Giorgio Agamben, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri. My usage of the adjective “biopolitical” here points to the importance of discerning and assessing individual life choices and habits in order to exercise sociopolitical control – and articulate a convincing collective representation of security.
- 17 Commenting on the filmic version of the nameless narrator, named “Jack”, Giroux writes that he is “no longer a producer of goods”. In Giroux’s reading, the crisis of (white) masculinity in the 1990s is related, among else, to the crisis of industrial culture. In other words, the emphasis on consumption fosters increasing alienation from the process of production and from the products themselves. See Giroux.
- 18 In this sense, former President George W. Bush’s “dead or alive” doctrine is the public articulation of a “private justice” mentality, but it does not bear less public value because of that.
- In more recent times, the “private execution” of Osama Bin Laden on part of U.S. military is a case that exemplifies many of the points I have been attempting to make. The logics implemented have been those of “private justice”. Following Bin Laden’s elimination, President Barack Obama’s statement “the world is a better place” resonates in my ear as a claim for a “collaborative”, globalized, open, public politics on security – a posteriori. This political act has been performed by US military forces as a “lone ranger” operation, and has been, with minimal time lag, articulated as allegedly investing the whole globe with its far-reaching positive effects.



---

*Opere citate, Œuvres citées,*  
*Zitierte Literatur, Works Cited*

---



- Andreas, Peter, and Price, Richard. "From War Fighting to Crime Fighting: Transforming the American National Security State." *International Studies Review* 3.3 (2001): 31-52.
- Barker, Jennifer. "'A Hero Will Rise': The Myth of the Fascist Man in *Fight Club* and *Gladiator*." *Literature Film Quarterly* 36.3 (2008): 171-87.
- Blazer, Alex E. "Glamorama, *Fight Club*, and the Terror of Narcissist Abjection." *American Fiction of the 1990s: Reflections of History and Culture*. Ed. Jay Prosser. London: Routledge, 2008. 177-89.
- Butler, Judith. Preface. *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004. xi-xxi.
- Buzan, Barry and Hansen, Lene, eds. *The Evolution of International Security Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Del Gizzo, Susanne. "The American Dream Unhinged: Romance and Reality in *The Great Gatsby* and *Fight Club*." *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* 6.1 (2007-2008): 69-94.
- Giroux, Henry A. "Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: *Fight Club*, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence." *JAC*, 21.1 (2001): 1-31.
- Knight, Peter. "Beyond the Cold War in Don DeLillo's *Mao II* and *Underworld*." *American Fiction of the 1990s: Reflections of History and Culture*. Ed. Jay Prosser. London: Routledge, 2008. 193-205.
- Krause, Keith, and Michael C. Williams, eds. *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *La condition postmoderne – Rapport sur le savoir*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979.
- Mathews, Peter. "Diagnosing Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*." *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature* 2.2 (2005): 81-104.
- Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. London: Vintage Books, 2006.
- . Afterword. *Fight Club*. London: Vintage Books, 2006. 209-18.
- Peoples, Columba, and Vaughan-Williams, Nick eds. *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- Petersen, Per Serritslev. "9/11 and the Problem of Imagination: *Fight Club* and *Glamorama* as Terrorist Pretexts." *Orbis Litterarium* 60 (2005): 133-44.

- Rothschild, Emma. "What is Security?" *Daedalus* 124.3 (1995): 53-98.
- Seltzer, Mark. *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Ta, Lynn M. "Hurt so Good: *Fight Club*, Masculine Violence, and the Crisis of Capitalism." *The Journal of American Culture* 29.3 (2006): 265-77.
- Walker, R. B. J. "The Subject of Security." *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*. Ed. Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Williams, Paul D., ed. *Security Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan – and Beyond*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Žižek, Slavoj. "An Ethical Plea for Lies and Masochism." *Lacan and Contemporary Film*. Eds. Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle. New York: Other Press, 2004, 173-86.
- . "The Ambiguity of the Masochist Social Link." *Perversion and the Social Relation*. Ed. Molly Ann Rothenberg, Slavoj Žižek, and Dennis A. Foster. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, 112-25.
- . "Afterword: Lenin's Choice." *Revolution at the Gates: Žižek on Lenin, The 1917 Writings*. Ed. Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 2002, 250-63.