

FIGHT CLUB FROM TEXT TO SCREEN

An analysis of the film adaptation of the novel *Fight Club*

Essay

by

Martin N. Ségur-Cabanac

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In 1999, director David Fincher brought to the cinema *Fight Club*, the début novel of American author Chuck Palahniuk, adapted by Jim Uhls. Packed with layer upon layer of themes, meanings, and possible interpretations, the film offers so much to its audience, it demands to be viewed over and over again. However, experience has shown this to be one of those rare works of popular art people either hate or love. Therefore, only those enchanted by the first viewing will be inclined to watch it again and again to discover new layers of meaning and new hidden clues every time. Sadly, what should have been a runaway box office hit became a victim of bad advertising campaigns (the bloody fighting aspect of the story was put to the fore, while the deeper layers of meaning were not even hinted at) and subsequently turned into a cult film.

The novel itself, though original in style and content, does not offer as many ideas, connotations, and undercurrents. Fascinating a read as it is, probably even more so considering it is a début work, and infused with the kind of urban philosophy that sometimes so blatantly speaks the truth one wonders why one hasn't thought of it oneself, it is Jim Uhls' adaptation that elevates it to a beautiful work of entertainment as well as art. He manages to tell a story in which almost every single line and every single image has a significance and purpose beyond the mere words it contains – a skill rare and precious in contemporary Hollywood screenwriting.

Fight Club traces the story of a young man, whose name is never revealed, from suffering from insomnia and forlornness to his creating an army of anarchic fellow men in equally desperate

and meaningless life situations. He does this with and because of Tyler Durden, a soap salesman he befriends and soon follows wherever he may lead. Through the creation of fight clubs, where men fight each other with bare fists under a strict set of rules defined by Tyler, they rally more and more men to their cause and philosophy of life. Under Tyler's leadership, the clubs evolve into task forces committing nihilistic crimes, culminating in "Project Mayhem", a complex organisation planning to send modern civilisation back a few hundred years through the destruction of the financial backbone of America.

The protagonist and Tyler share a special bond, a connection reminiscent of childhood "best friends", a unity somehow lost through the often painful experience of growing up. They are so much two sides of a coin that it is not too surprising to find out, two-thirds into the story (chapter 21 of 30 in the book, and as the second act climax in the film), that Tyler really is an invented personality – a Norman Bates type schizophrenic alter ego of the main character, created through and existing only in his imagination. Nevertheless, it is a surprise that works for most first-time viewers. Sadly, both book and film feature an entirely unnecessary scene in which readers and audiences respectively are treated as mere feeble-minded on-lookers: the fact of Tyler Durden being an alternative persona of the main character is stated so bluntly it hurts. Whether this is a product of a freak incident of carelessness in an otherwise perfect film, or one of deliberate design to bring across the message even to the most obtuse of the audience, it should have ended on the cutting room floor.

Likeability of the protagonist(s) is a well known Hollywood convention: we must find something in the hero(es) to connect with. Jim Uhls enhances this by reducing the level of violence acceptable to the members of "Project Mayhem", an underground guerrilla group set up by Tyler Durden. Whereas they openly and willingly commit murder in the book, they do recognise and respect certain limits in their activities in the film: Tyler tells the members of the project that "yes, you're going to have to kill someone" in the novel, while in the film the main character accusingly asks his alter ego "since when is Fight Club about murder?", only to learn that Tyler has taken certain measures to prevent all but accidental deaths.¹ To "purists" – fans of the book who despise any alterations in film adaptations – this might seem a bad decision, but it serves its function perfectly: because the

¹ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 125 and *Fight Club* (Twentieth Century Fox, David Fincher, 1999).

audience is reassured that their hero is not willing to commit murder – that he does refuse to cross that line from prankster offences (tough as they may be) to more serious crimes – they are willing to sustain their empathy and root for the main character. Furthermore, the protagonist grows to be much more proactive in the film, trying desperately to make right the wrongs his alter ego commits. Whereas in the book he remains weak and out of control, at one point throwing himself into the midst of a fight club as an act of suicide (at this point he does not even hold the power to kill himself, although he wishes to die), in the film he starts to fight Tyler the moment he finds out who he really is. Therefore, although both novel and film climax with the main character shooting himself, they do so with different meanings and intentions. In the novel, the protagonist pulls the trigger because he knows about his schizophrenic nature and is too powerless and too desperate to live on – he chooses suicide rather than face his crimes and take responsibility. The film, however, culminates with the main character choosing suicide as an option not out of weakness or unwillingness to live on, but as the only way to rid the world of Tyler: he faces up to his responsibility and makes the morally right choice. It is important, therefore, that both in the novel and in the film, the protagonist survives his suicide attempt. In the book, he ends up in a madhouse, with the very real possibility of Tyler still existing in his head to be reawakened at some point in the future to wreak further havoc. In the film, he lives to see the bombs Tyler and the members of “Project Mayhem” have built reduce the skyscrapers all around him to smouldering rubble; he survives it all, with only him knowing Tyler even existed, now freed from him and ready to face up to the future he just created for himself and everyone around him.

The task of a screenwriter adapting a novel also often involves the cutting down of the cast: novels may be able to give life to twenty or more characters, but a film must be concise and focused on a handful of archetypal figures in order to not confuse the audience and keep the plot going. In that respect, Palahniuk's novel offers the perfect prerequisites: a concentrated cast of three main characters and two or three supporting characters, told through a single first-person point of view. Jim Uhls therefore comes away with very minor changes of the character setup. Only in one instance does he completely eliminate a character serving an important function (that of a mechanic taking the main character on a car ride and almost causing an accident by design), handing that function to Tyler Durden to great effect: it very much enhances the impact of the scene as well as the

relationship between the main character and Tyler. Uhls also takes the scene a bit further by making Tyler actually cause an accident, which triggers one of the film's most memorable lines: "We just had a near-life experience!"²

If the novel at times takes on the form of an essay rather than a fictional story, it does so by speaking directly to the reader, even making use of the second person pronoun "you". Palahniuk does this to make us think of his philosophy not just in terms of those of a fictional character, but as a statement: think about this – outside of the framework of my story and my characters – isn't this a fact about life? About *your* life? The easiest and most logical choice in a film adaptation would seem to be the device of voice over, i.e. having the narrator's stream of thoughts direct the audience's thoughts. And Jim Uhls does subscribe to this method. But he also goes one controversial step further: at a critical moment in the story, after Tyler Durden forever changed the life of a convenient store clerk by holding a gun to his head and forcing him to return to university to fulfil his life dream of becoming a veterinarian, Tyler speaks directly to the audience. Looking straight into the camera lens and through it out of the screen at us, he tells us that we are not our jobs, not how much money we have on the bank, not the contents of our wallets, not the cars we drive. According to Tyler, we are the "all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world."³ Utilising a technique borrowed from Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), David Fincher employs digital CGI effects to distort the image and make visible the holes in the celluloid film, thereby enforcing yet again the message that this is an actor on screen talking to us, the audience. We are made aware that we are not mere passive recipients of storytelling, but living, breathing, thinking human beings, and that we should engage and critically think about what we are watching and what we are being told. It is one of the most powerful moments in the film, representing the mid-act climax of the second act.

Another homage to *Persona* exists in the splicing in of an image of a penis into a family film, an act Tyler commits during his night job as a movie projectionist. Bergman did just that in the opening shots of the original version of his film. But whereas the old master used it to disturb and provoke his audience, lending a specific atmosphere to his film from the outset, in *Fight Club* it is used as comic character development. This technique leads on to another method used in *Fight*

² *Fight Club* (1999).

³ *Ibid.*

Club: images of Tyler Durden are added to various scenes before the character makes his formal appearance. In short flashes, Tyler enters the screen early on, reinforcing the notion that he is part of the main character's own personality. This purely visual effect is, of course, not present in the book, but serves its function perfectly in the film. Whether it was Jim Uhls or David Fincher who decided to include those flash images, it is a wonderfully proficient way of adaptation: utilising the medium adapted into to the full extent to tell a given story.

In order to concentrate the plot towards what is the most interesting and important relationship in the story – that between the main character and Tyler – Jim Uhls significantly reduces the role of Marla Singer, the female supporting character and love interest for both the main character and Tyler. If in the novel she gradually builds up an emotionally ever closer relationship to the main character, while at the same time having sex with Tyler (both of whom, of course, are the same person to her), in the film she remains left outside, constantly hovering on the periphery of the plot; always present, yet never centre-stage. In the book, the main character reveals to her the schizophrenic alter ego nature of Tyler once he discovers it and she then tries to help him overcome his inner nemesis. In the film, he does the far more sensible thing: rather than ask her for help, he tries to save her by sending her out of town, out of his reach. It is clear, therefore, that in the film he would like to be closer to her, but refuses to engage out of moral rules he places on himself.

All these choices made in the process of adaptation significantly enhance the story's impact and originality, making it the most remarkable and critically polarising film to come out of Hollywood in 1999, probably in the entire fading decade. Very seldom does the Los Angeles based production behemoth deliver a product working so beautifully on so many levels. Be it the theme of father-son relationships, of male friendship and bonding, of the shortcomings of consumerism and capitalism, or of the out-of-place and devoid-of-purpose feeling of an entire generation of men “raised by women”, Jim Uhls and David Fincher deliver a deep and meaningful analysis of the male psyche in the dying twentieth century.⁴ Considering the overall rather mediocre source, it is a remarkable triumph of film adaptation and proves once again that art can indeed be paired with entertainment and, even more astounding, such a combination can come out of Hollywood.

4 Ibid.

Bibliography

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