

【論文】

The *Fight Club* Path to Buddhist Heteronormativity<sup>1)</sup>

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仏教の異性愛規範の道

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**Abstract:** This paper demonstrates how Buddhist readings of David Fincher's (1999) *Fight Club* dovetail with analyses that critique the film's conclusion as championing heteronormativity. In contrast to previous religious studies readings that have largely overlooked the characters' sexuality, I argue that *Fight Club* constructs a Buddhist heteronormativity. The protagonist Narrator's alter-ego Tyler Durden is both the object of his narcissistic homoerotic desire and an obstacle to his liberation. The film concludes with the protagonist murdering his alter-ego to reach enlightenment and embrace a heterosexual relationship with the character Marla Singer. Of significance, the film's messaging, to an extent, finds resonance with certain contemporary Western Buddhist discourses that express homophobic or hetero(sexist)/(normative) sentiments.

**Key words:** Fight Club; Religion and Film; Buddhism and Sexuality; Western Buddhism

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Commenting on the homoerotic subtext and heteronormative ending of David Fincher's 1999 *Fight Club*, Robert Westerfelhaus and Robert Alan Brookey (319) conclude that the film—despite its irreverence<sup>2)</sup> —“provides a mediated ritual experience with a narrative outcome that even the strictest homophobic religious fundamentalists and social conservatives can applaud: homosexuality dies, and heterosexuality survives.”

*Fight Club's* associating “escalating violence” with “homosocial bonding/homoeroticism” might be interpreted as a “symbolic warning” of the perceived dangers that same-sex desires or attachments may pose to individuals and the social (heterosexist) order (ibid.). The authors are explicitly concerned with how this portrayal of sexuality aligns with the political agenda of the Christian Religious Right.

The following discussion does not challenge Westerfelhaus and Brookey's claims. On the contrary, I argue that their analysis provides the groundwork to explore the relationship between *Fight Club's* portrayal of sexuality and other religious—Buddhist—expressions of homophobia. This paper takes an inverse approach to *Fight Club*. Instead of examining the coincidental or “unlikely confluence” of *Fight Club's* (implicit) messaging on sexuality with the explicit homophobia of Christian actors—who, most likely, take issue with numerous other elements of the movie<sup>3)</sup> —this analysis begins with an investigation of the film's overt Buddhist themes to argue that the narrative constructs a Buddhist heteronormativity that resonates with homophobic/hetero(sexist) (normative) sentiments

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2) Even though a dissonance exists between *Fight Club's* graphic violence, sex and explicit language and conservative Christian morals, Evangelical retreats for men have appropriated the film's title. What *Fight Club* and these ministries do have in common is a concern over the presumed “masculinity crisis” in the United States. See: Poe Hays and Wersé.

sometimes found in Western Buddhist communities (Scherer; Corless; Gleig). In other words, whereas Westerfelhaus and Brookey pay little attention to the narrative's religious elements, this discussion begins by deconstructing the film's incorporation of Buddhist motifs into a story that depicts a protagonist who suppresses his same-sex desires.

While Westerfelhaus and Brookey's analysis of *Fight Club*'s heteronormative conclusion does not acknowledge the film's religious imagery, Buddhist scholars (Reed; Green; Seton), in parallel fashion, fail to consider the narrative's portrayal of sexuality as they argue that the protagonist reaches enlightenment in the final scenes. Given that, as detailed below, contemporary Buddhist teachers and communities have, at times, suggested that same-sex desires and/or an LGBTQI identity is an ego-enhancing hindrance to the pursuit of enlightenment, I argue that these readings are not mutually exclusive. *Fight Club*'s ending shows the protagonist Narrator battling his alter-ego Tyler Durden, who is both the object of his narcissistic autoerotic desire and the obstacle to his enlightenment, before taking the hand of the heterosexual female character Marla Singer, who, according to Ronald S. Green (28) represents *Dharmakāya* (dharma body) or ultimate truth. *Fight Club* ultimately combines contemporary Buddhist homophobic/heteronormative sentiments with extreme violence. The protagonist's liberation necessitates the (attempted) murder of his alter-ego/bi-sexual partner and his entering a heterosexual relationship.

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3) During an interview, in reference to the studio's objection to the inclusion of a line by the character Marla ("I want to have your abortion") David Fincher stated: "But they [the studio] didn't want to get into the whole Religious Right thing. I mean, this movie is the poster child for movies that should be picketed" (Pierce 108).

## Restoring a Heteronormative Masculinity in a Buddhist Context

Suggestive of the Buddhist notion that the world is illusory, *Fight Club* begins with a riveting exploration of the unnamed Narrator's brain (Seton 4). Beginning with the opening, and continuing throughout the film up until the heteronormative conclusion, the Buddhist narrative is laced with homoeroticism as the protagonist explores his sexuality. From the cinematic exploration of the brain, the camera emerges through the barrel of a gun. The audience next sees the Narrator [Edward Norton] seemingly bound to a chair with the phallic weapon—held by his standing villainous alter-ego Tyler Durden [Brad Pitt]—jammed into his mouth.<sup>4)</sup> Foreshadowing the Narrator's self-realization that he is suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder and that he and Tyler are, in fact, the same person, the audience hears Norton's voice-over stating matter-of-factly: "People are always asking me if I know Tyler Durden." The captive Narrator then informs us that the paramilitary organization Project Mayhem—under Tyler's leadership—has prepared to set off explosions to destroy a dozen high rises.

Backtracking to explain how he found himself in this predicament, the protagonist begins by recounting his struggle with insomnia. Protesting a doctor's refusal to prescribe him sleeping pills, he declares "I'm in pain," which prompts the unsympathetic physician to quip that to see real pain he should visit a group therapy session for men with testicular cancer. The Narrator takes the advice and begins

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4) Presenting the "Queer Take" on the film, Brookey and Westerfelhaus relay, "Some critics found the film implicitly homoerotic. Andrew O'Hehir (1999) of *Salon.com* writes: 'You certainly can't say that Fincher or screenwriter Jim Uhls. . . hold back on the film's psychological subtext—*Fight Club* opens with our nameless narrator [Norton] tied to a chair with Tyler's, uh, gun in his mouth.'"

to attend support groups for the terminally ill. On these occasions, he cries with the other participants, and the emotional release temporarily relieves him of his difficulties sleeping. He becomes outraged, however, by encountering the woman character Marla in multiple groups. The presence of another “faker” exposes his own façade of pretending to be inflicted with a serious illness. Distracted, he once again finds himself unable to cry and his insomnia returns. The problem is seemingly resolved when he confronts Marla and they create a schedule to avoid bumping into each other at the groups.

It becomes abundantly clear that the diffident Narrator is actually attracted to Marla when he asks for her phone number on the pretense that they “might wanna switch nights.” By this point in the film the viewer has already learned that the protagonist is an emasculated corporate drone. His fumbling to ask Marla for her phone number (juxtaposed by her fearlessness to walk through traffic to comply with the request) and scenes featuring men with testicular cancer crying (including the character Bob, a former body builder with “bitch tits”) all work in tandem to signal to the audience that *Fight Club* is an exploration into the perceived emasculating power of American consumerism.

The narrative’s preoccupation with a societal “masculinity crisis” sets the stage to introduce the violent and oversexed<sup>5)</sup> alter-ego Tyler Durden. Tyler takes the leading role in creating Fight Club, an underground venue for bare fist boxing matches, which functions as a substitute for the therapy sessions that the Narrator previously

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5) Brian Locke (71) examines the parallels between Tyler’s “porn-persona” and depictions of African American men as being oversexed. Locke writes: “Since Tyler represents the excessive or macho pole, it is not surprising that the film dresses him up in stereotypes of black men. For example, Tyler wears the clothes of a pimp” (75).

attended. The alter-ego character also enters a sexual relationship with Marla (triggering jealousy on the part of the Narrator). By introducing the Narrator to a world of violence and heterosexual intercourse Tyler restores the former's (hyper)/hetero-masculine identity. This process of recovering heteronormative masculinity, however, involves not only excessive violence but also an exploration of the protagonist's autoerotic same-sex desire for Tyler. Not surprisingly, then, in the final scenes the Narrator executes Tyler—"homosexuality dies"—and takes Marla's hand—"heterosexuality survives."

This narrative triumph of heteronormativity unfolds in a Buddhist context. In interviews, the director and actors have explicitly described/ (promoted) *Fight Club* as a Buddhist tale; and following the film's release several academics have produced sophisticated Buddhist interpretations (Reed; Green; Seton; Fielding). According to these readings, after bringing the Narrator to the brink of enlightenment Tyler actually becomes an obstacle to his spiritual liberation. Tyler, the "ego-self" that Green (25) maintains must be destroyed in order for the Narrator to attain enlightenment, is seemingly bi-sexual and the "narcissistic projection of homoerotic desire" (Westerfelhaus and Brookey 315). It is thus appropriate to consider *Fight Club's* construction of heteronormativity as possessing a Buddhist quality.

### Destroying the Homoeroticized Ego-Self

Green likens the Narrator's experiences to the story of Prince Siddhartha Gautama and the Four Sights. When the prince ventures from the palace with his chariot driver he learns about old age, sickness and death. On the fourth trip outside the palace gates, the historical Buddha

is inspired by the sight of an ascetic. Similarly, after witnessing much human suffering in therapy groups, the *Fight Club* Narrator meets Tyler Durden (Greene 16-17)—a renouncer of feminized 90s consumerism—while flying on a business trip. Tyler introduces himself as a soap maker and showcases his knowledge of making explosives from household products. Embedded in their dialogue are hints that Tyler is an alter-ego (e.g. comments about changing seats and carrying the same briefcase). As the scene draws to a close, Tyler, who occupies the emergency window seat, squeezes past the Narrator to exit into the aisle with a passing sexual innuendo: “Now a question of etiquette as I pass do I give you the ass or the crotch.” Tyler shifts so that his buttocks come close to the Narrator’s face. Then, in the aisle, he has to turn again to move past a woman flight attendant bending over to serve a passenger. This time his pelvis is in close contact with the woman’s buttocks. The scene hints at the character’s bi-sexual orientation. (He subsequently enters a sexual relationship with Marla and becomes intimate with the Narrator.)

Viewers next watch the Narrator arriving home from the airport only to learn that an explosion has destroyed his condo. The scene is rife with suggestions of a (temporary) abandonment of a heterosexual orientation. Amongst the debris lying on the pavement is a burnt Yin-Yang (female/male)<sup>6</sup> coffee table and a scrap of paper with Marla’s phone number. Inside a phone booth, the Narrator first calls Marla, only to hang up as soon as she answers. He then pulls Tyler’s business card out of his pocket and dials him instead. Tyler does not answer. Disappointed, the Narrator turns to exit the booth when the pay phone rings. On the other end, Tyler explains that he “star sixty-nined”—a callback function for

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6) Julien Fielding (474) discusses how the Narrator and Marla are embodiments of Yin while Tyler represents Yang.

unknown numbers and slang for an oral sex position—the Narrator.

The two men meet at a bar where the Narrator laments the loss of all his material possessions. Tyler responds with a sermon deriding consumerism that concludes with the dictate, “the things you own end up owning you”—an overt allusion to the Buddhist ideal of detachment. Outside the bar the characters’ interaction “plays out as a coy, homoerotic flirtation” (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 33). The homeless Narrator says he needs to find a hotel. Tyler, in response, chastises him for being unable, after three pitchers of beer, to ask to stay the night at his place. The homoerotic subtext is underscored when Tyler demandingly asserts, “Cut the foreplay and just ask.”

Immediately after having agreed to spend the night together, Tyler makes an unusual request: “I want you to hit me as hard as you can.” The subsequent brawl—like much of *Fight Club*’s violence—is indicative of both spiritual and sexual self-exploration. On the one hand, having learned that the Narrator has never been in a fight, Tyler rationalizes his request: “How much can you know about yourself if you’ve never been in a fight?”<sup>7)</sup> On the other hand, the fight itself is a metaphor for sex. Brookey and Westerfelhaus (34) describe the subsequent scene:

Afterwards, they share a beer as Tyler smokes in a way suggestive of post-coital relaxation. Jack [Narrator] casually proposes, “We should do this again sometime.”

They do, in fact, fight again. Gradually, intrigued bystanders partake in the brawls. The group participation results in the establishment

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7) Charley Reed likens *Fight Club*’s violence to Buddhist meditation.

of *Fight Club*. The homosocial ritualized fights in the bar's basement, according to Brookey Westerfelhaus, obfuscate the story's homoeroticism that is nevertheless signified "when the camera lingers over bare-chested, sweaty men with their muscles flexed and bodies pressed together" (ibid. 29).<sup>8)</sup> The homosocial trope is underscored when these men take up residence together. *Fight Club* quickly mutates into *Project Mayhem*, with Tyler's dilapidated house serving at its base where the men sleep in bunk beds.

Homoerotic and Buddhist connotations surround descriptions of the house as well as events that occur on location. While detailing the building's state of disrepair, the Narrator, who has already begun residing with Tyler, comments in a voice-over: "everything wooden swelled and shrank." Just prior to this innuendo, the two men are seen laughing intimately as they hit golf balls in a deserted neighborhood. In another scene Tyler is bathing while the Narrator sits on the floor. Conversing like (celibate) Buddhist monks,<sup>9)</sup> the two men express skepticism about heterosexual marriage (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 31). As *Fight Club* transforms into a paramilitary unit, the house, in addition to functioning as the domicile of a same-sex couple—in the guise of a Buddhist monastery—becomes the base site for an exclusively male organization.

Demarcating *Fight Club*'s (de)volving into the terrorist organization *Project Mayhem*, we see Tyler employing a Zen ritual to test the resolve of prospective members (Seton 10-11; Fielding 485). Mirroring the way

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8) Amy Taubin (63) makes a similar observation about the fight scenes: "*Fight Club* is a doppelganger movie with a strong homoerotic undercurrent. It's not just there in the intimacy between the Norton and Pitt characters, but also in the *Fight Club* sequences, shot in a wet-dream half-light that turns the men's bodies opalescent as they pound each other into the cement. And, of course, it's there in Pitt's presence, which seems more feminine the more it's butched up."

individuals enter a Zen monastery, “applicants” are made to wait outside on the porch for three days and endure physical and verbal abuse meted out by Tyler and the Narrator. Upon accepting successful “applicants,” Tyler confirms that the individuals have in tow the required items— 2 black shirts, 2 pairs of black pants, 1 pair of black boots, 2 pairs of black socks, 1 black jacket and 300 dollars for “personal burial money”— for monastic/military training.<sup>10)</sup> In this sequence, Tyler (Zen abbot/fascist leader) appears on the porch as distinguishably queer, dressed in a pink bathrobe.<sup>11)</sup> Moreover, recruits’ black clothes, cropped hair and posture “plays off a military fetish popular in some quarters of the queer community” (Westerfelhaus and Brookey 314-15).

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9) Tyler states: “We’re a generation of men raised by women. I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer we need.” Given the religious context of the story, this comment might be considered as echoing variant and inconsistent Buddhist textual misogynist tendencies. Regarding the first sentence, it is significant to note that motherhood has at times been depicted as symbolic of attachment and samsara (Harris 53-54). The second sentence is more pointedly referring to women (Marla)—as spouses. Buddhist texts have also portrayed women as temptresses that may lead celibate male monks off the spiritual path (Sponberg 20-21). Thus, the bathing scene might be interpreted as depicting an elder/teacher monk (Tyler) counseling a younger/student monk (Narrator) about the threat that women/sex/marriage may pose to the quest for enlightenment. In a later scene, Tyler is explicit in advising the Narrator to end his relationship with Marla. It is important to remember that even though Tyler is the one seen engaged in a sexual affair with Marla he is also aware that he is the Narrator’s alter-ego. When he makes this revelation to the Narrator he makes a point to clarify that it is actually the Narrator who is sexually involved with Marla. Therefore, his earlier instruction to the Narrator “Get rid of her [Marla]” could be read as an attempt to forbid heterosexual intercourse in a monastic setting. Furthermore, towards the climax Tyler actually poses a threat to Marla’s life. In sum, *Fight Club* takes Buddhist misogynistic sentiments to their extreme. This interpretation does not necessarily discredit the argument that the film contains a homoerotic subtext. The medieval Japanese literary subgenre, *chigo monogatari*, relay stories of (coerced) love affairs between elder Buddhist monks (Tyler) and young male acolytes (Narrator). See: (Faure; Atkins).

Homoeroticism is also found in the Narrator's own (Buddhist) initiation into Tyler's program. Tyler kisses and then pours lye on the Narrator's hand. The chemical burn is reminiscent of Chinese Buddhist self-immolation practices believed to provide "a bodily path to attain awakening and ultimately Buddhahood" (Benn 205). To cope with the excruciating pain, the Narrator attempts a guided meditation practice. He contemplates being alone in a cave with Marla whom he is about to embrace before Tyler violently interrupts the fantasy. Tyler slaps the Narrator across the face shouting: "This is the greatest moment of your life man and you're off somewhere missing it." In this sequence the Narrator tries to persuade Tyler to release his hand yelling, "I get the point," only to be rebuked by his alter-ego for "feeling premature enlightenment." Finally, the sadomasochistic violence concludes with Tyler neutralizing the burn with vinegar. The Narrator is left with a scar "that distinctly resembles a vagina" (King 374).

This scene might be interpreted as foreshadowing the narrative conclusion in which the protagonist embraces heterosexuality and attains enlightenment.<sup>12)</sup> Ironically enough, Tyler, who represents a homosexual(ized) spiritual path, instructs his same-sex partner/devotee

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10) Two passages from Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* identify these practices as Buddhist:

(1) "This is how Buddhist temples have tested applicants going back for bah-zillion years, Tyler says. You tell the applicant to go away, and if his resolve is so strong that he waits at the entrance without food or shelter or encouragement for three days, then and only then can he enter and begin the training (129)."

(2): "One day, Tyler gives me five hundred dollars in cash and tells me to keep it in my shoe all the time. My personal burial money. This is another old Buddhist monastery thing (130)."

11) Quoting Melissa Iocco, Claire Sisco King (376) writes: "The 'tough muscular leader. . . also wears fluffy pink slippers,' embodying 'both masculine heterosexual virility and just a bit of camp drag.'"

that he is experiencing “premature enlightenment” while leaving a permanent heterosexual(ized) mark on his hand. After all, as James A. Benn notes, Buddhist self-immolations “etched the teachings into the skin” (211). Heterosexuality is (quite literally) “etched” into the dharma (teachings) of Fight Club/Project Mayhem. Though Tyler disrupts the Narrator’s fantasy of Marla, in the end, according to Green, the protagonist’s enlightenment is signified to the audience by his embrace of a relationship with the female character. In accordance with previous Buddhist readings, Tyler, in this scene is simultaneously the means and obstruction to liberation. The initiation ritual hints at the Narrator’s need to immolate the object of his same-sex desire, Tyler. In Green’s (25) Buddhist reading, Tyler is the Narrator’s “ego-self” that must be destroyed.

Green also provides another lens through which we can approach Tyler vis-à-vis the Narrator and Marla, namely the teaching of the *Trikāya* that explicates the three bodies of the Buddha (ibid. 26-28). In this schema, the Narrator is *Nirmaṇakāya* (transformation body); Tyler is *Saṃbhogakāya* (enjoyment body) and Marla is *Dharmakāya* (dharma body). The three bodies can be analogized to different mental states:

A simile of the *Trikāya* is that of the three mental states of waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep. The waking state corresponds to the physical limitations of the *Nirmaṇakāya*;

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12) Other scenes simultaneously fuse together homoerotic and Buddhist connotations and foreshadow the narrative conclusion. For instance, in one scene we watch the two characters making a “fuss” over a “Gucci ad, which depicts a male model, whose build and pose echo those found in gay pornography” (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 29). The Narrator asks, “Is that what a man looks like?” Laughing, Tyler replies: “Ay, self-improvement is masturbation. Now, self-destruction. . .” This final remark hints that the Narrator must discard his alter-ego to reach enlightenment.

dreaming to the relative freedom from space and time of the Saṃbhogakāya, and dreamless sleep to the total freedom of the Dharmakāya (Trikaya 989-90).

Similarly Green explains: “The physical body (*Nirṃāṇakāya*) can only realize the ultimate truth of the universe (*Dharmakāya*) through meditative insight (*Saṃbhogakāya*)” (27). Put simply, Tyler as “meditative insight” is leading the Narrator to Marla. Yet, Green also insists that “the method” Tyler offers ultimately “must be abandoned.” (25). The Narrator does, in fact, kill Tyler in the end via an intraoral gun-shot. Tyler, thus, signifies a temporary meditative homoeroticized path that the Narrator must proceed along to understand ultimate truth signified by a heterosexual relationship with Marla.

Precisely because Green fails to consider the characters’ sexual orientation/desire(s), Westerfelhaus and Brookey’s reading of *Fight Club* complements his Buddhist interpretation. The authors assert that the Narrator’s involvement with Tyler and Fight Club/Project Mayhem is essentially a liminal stage in which heteronormativity is suspended. Westerfelhaus and Brookey employ Max Gluckman’s concept of rituals of rebellion that “are intended to reinforce rather than undermine a society’s rules” to explain the function of the homo(erotic)/(social) quality of the violence (308). Accordingly, the termination of the Narrator’s same-sex relationship with Tyler represents a reinforced restoration of his heterosexual orientation. When considering this interpretation alongside Green’s reading, it is clear that assimilating to heteronormativity is a prerequisite for the Narrator’s enlightenment.

## Resonances with Contemporary Buddhist Hetero(sexist) (machoistic) (normative) Discourses

The ambiguity of the third Buddhist lay precept prohibiting sexual misconduct invites interpretation and debate. Buddhist attitudes towards sex(uality) have been informed by cultural norms. Due to the absence of “self-identified queer communities in the cultures where traditional Buddhism developed,” writes Roger Corless, “the precepts assume heterosexism, and homosexuality is largely ignored” (254). In contrast, in Corless’s view “the prominence of a queer community” in the United States has created a situation in which “Buddhism has been asked to take a stance [on homosexuality], and the stance has largely been positive” (256). There is much evidence to support this proposition: within meditative traditions can be found LGBTQI identity groups (Corless 1998; 2000; Gleig 2012; 2014; 2019); non-essentialist philosophies have been employed at the theoretical (Corless 2004) and practical level (Gleig 2012; 2014) to queer Buddhism; finally in terms of same-sex marital rites, the Buddhist Churches of America began performing wedding ceremonies in the 1970s—perhaps earlier (Wilson);<sup>13)</sup> while Sōka Gakkai International (SGI) USA made an announcement that it would begin offering “marriage-like rites” to gay and lesbian couples in 1995 (Dart).

On the other hand, there are infrequent cases in which Buddhist communities or leaders, including the Dalai Lama,<sup>14)</sup> have either made remarks that sparked controversy or exhibited outright homophobic stances. For instance, prior to the SGI split with Nichiren Shōshū, the

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13) According to Wilson there are unverifiable rumors that the first such wedding at the Buddhist Church of San Francisco occurred in the 1950s (*ibid.* 37).

organization “recommended that its gay male followers participate in ‘human revolution’ (*ningen kakumei*) by marrying a woman so as, it was hoped, to become heterosexual” (Corless 1998, 256). Another example is the homophobic response to a published interview with Buddhist scholar Jeffrey Hopkins, who “discussed his own coming out and explored the concept of gay tantric sex.” The editor in chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* reported that subsequently “the magazine received over 50 anti-gay letters from (presumably Buddhist) subscribers” (Whitney 20). Other cases include the Korean Master Sungsan and Chinese Master Hsüan Hua—both influential leaders in North America—linking homosexuality to karma. The former indicated homosexuality was the result of karma while the latter maintained that it would lead to rebirth in lower realms. In another vein, Insight Meditation leader S.N. Goenka was skeptical of homosexuality as “it mixes what he regards as male and female energies” (Corless 1998, 255). Similarly, a Zen teacher reportedly felt that “energy between lovers was supposed to come from ‘opposite poles,’ and that energy from the ‘same poles’ was ‘incorrect’” (Gwynn 1992. Quoted in Wilson 2012, 33).

In particular, *Fight Club*’s heteronormative conclusion resonates closely with the homophobic (and hetero-machoistic)<sup>15</sup> sentiments expressed by the Danish Buddhist master, Lama Ole Nydahl. For instance, Nydahl has speculated “about the prevalence of strong jealousy in same-sex

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14) The Dalai Lama has been criticized for making “contradictory statements about homosexuality” (Conkin, 351). Conkin presents an overview of the Dalai Lama’s comments on gay sex and the precepts as well as the reaction on the part of Western practitioners, scholars and activists. More recently, in 2014, the Dalai Lama expressed nuanced support for same-sex marriage, with the reported indication that religious people should still adhere to “their faith’s rules on sexual behavior” (Bixby).

relationships” (Scherer 96).<sup>16)</sup> The Narrator, as noted above, is seen visibly jealous when learning of Marla’s sexual relationship with Tyler. Later—following the formation of Project Mayhem—the audience watches the protagonist giving violent expression to his covetous feelings when he pummels a recruit toward whom Tyler has grown affectionate.<sup>17)</sup> Perhaps more significant is the film’s mirroring Nydahl’s concern regarding “the assumed ego-enhancing quality of same sex desire.” Burkhard Scherer delineates Nydahl’s position:

This would allegedly constitute a clear obstacle for Buddhist practice, which aims to weaken and dissolve the ‘ego’ into the experience of non-duality. Unwittingly, Nydahl seems to echo

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15) Other parallels might be drawn between, on the one hand, *Fight Club*’s portrayals of gender and sexuality and, on the other hand, Nydahl’s persona and hetero-machoistic views. For instance, mirroring the film’s preoccupation with notions of a masculinity crisis, Nydahl “follows mainstream Tibetan and pre-or rather counter-feminist Western gender stereotyping.” *Fight Club*’s angst-ridden male characters/(fans) would presumably find appealing Nydahl’s “counter-feminist” gender essentialism, which he combines “with popular pseudo-scientific evolutionary-biological views” that attributes “to males the tunnel vision of the Neolithic hunter” and posits females as cave-dwelling caregivers (Scherer 92). The audience literally sees Marla lying passively in a cave and listens to Tyler propounding: “In the world I see, you’re stalking elk through the Grand Canyon forests around the ruins of the Rockefeller Center.”

Secondly, parallels can be drawn between Tyler as a hyper (hetero) sexual character and Nydahl’s promiscuity and characterizations of his lay movement, the Diamond Way, as being either sex-positive or hedonistic. Scherer notes that Nydahl was “openly promiscuous” and had relations with many female students in the 1970s and 80s. Moreover, the Danish Buddhist teacher “states publicly that he has a strong personal libido and sees sexual activity as an important part of a full mentally healthy life.” Finally, resonating with *Fight Club*’s sexualized Buddhist pedagogy, Nydahl makes “frequent sexual innuendos and jokes as part of his missionary work” (Scherer 89).

16) Echoing this sentiment an Indian teacher, reportedly, informed his American student that “homosexuality is just another form of greed” (Hall 243).

17) For a discussion of this scene see (Westerfelhaus and Brookey 315).

Fritz Morgenthaler's mid-20<sup>th</sup> century psycho-analytical theory on homosexuality as privileging 'autonomy' vs 'identity' or 'integration,' which underlies heterosexual relationships (ibid.).

Similarly, in an ethnographic study on an LGBTQI sangha, Ann Gleig found that one "critique leveled at identity-based groups is that they reify a sense of self and are in conflict with the Buddhist teachings of *anatta* (no-self) and *shunyata* (emptiness)" (2012, 211).<sup>18</sup> Conversely, Gleig observes that Buddhist non-essentialism and queer theory is employed by some LGBTQI practitioners "subversively as a way to challenge heteronormativity" (ibid. 198). Others, however, may use non-essentialism to assimilate with heteronormativity.

Finally, LGBTQI populations who identify with a liberal emphasis on similarity, appear to utilize Buddhist non-essentialism to assimilate into rather than challenge Buddhist heteronormativity (ibid. 212).

The closing scenes of *Fight Club* present an extremely violent portrayal of "Buddhist non-essentialism" being employed to grant the Narrator the ability "to assimilate into . . . Buddhist heteronormativity." Alluding to Buddhist cyclicity, the end returns to the beginning. While the audience learns that the Narrator is not bound to the chair, the Narrator learns that he (not Tyler) is holding the gun. Rising out of the chair, he points the weapon upright under his chin and decisively tells his alter-ego: "Tyler, I want you to really listen to me. My eyes are open"—a clear indication that he has attained enlightenment. Inserting the gun into his mouth, the Narrator quickly pulls the trigger. Miraculously, he

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18) See also: (Gleig 2014, 13)

survives—with a gruesome bullet wound—and Tyler falls down dead. Immediately preceding the planned bombing of high rises housing credit card companies, Project Mayhem members arrive with Marla in tow as a hostage. The Narrator orders Marla's release. Taking his side, Marla and the Narrator hold hands. The buildings collapse. Presumably referring to his experimenting with fascism and homosexuality, the Narrator explains, "You met me at a very strange time in my life." Resounding the opening scene's exploration of the brain and signaling that the world, in Buddhist terms, is illusory, the Pixies' song "Where is my mind?" provides the soundtrack to the end credits (Seton 4). But a split second before the credits roll, a pornographic single frame splice of a man's genitalia flashes on the screen.

## Conclusions

When introducing his anarchist alter-ego prankster to the audience, the Narrator relays in a voice-over that "Tyler was a night person, while the rest of us slept, he worked" as a projectionist, who inserted pornographic frames into family films at the "exact moment" that projectors are switched to start a new reel. Indicating that a reel "changeover" is going to occur "little dots" called "cigarette burns" appear in the upper corner of the screen. The Narrator is explaining his Dissociative Identity Disorder. The Narrator/Tyler "changeover" occurs when the protagonist sleeps. Indicative of the "cigarette burns" Tyler is frequently seen smoking and then flicking a cigarette that disappears off into a corner of the big screen. Claire Sisco King comments:

As one of the only constants within his appearance, a burning cigarette reminds us that Tyler, like the film texts he produces

(and is produced by), is always “changing over” (376).

The single frame slice before the credits lead Brookey and Westerfelhaus (38) to beg the question “The End?” (Chuck Palahniuk’s novel by the same title hints that Tyler will return; and the character has, in fact, been resurrected in the author’s 2015 comic book sequel *Fight Club 2*). The film is by all means inconclusive. Tyler merely appears to die. Smelling the smoke of his own flesh burning, he seemingly becomes the final incarnate “cigarette burn.” A dramatic “changeover” occurs, and the Narrator regains agency. But, the final insertion of a half-erect penis suggests that everything Tyler represents (e.g. same-sex desire, queer identity, fascism, hypermasculinity, misogyny) has survived to assume a dormant state in the protagonist’s psyche. This raises questions about *Fight Club*’s construction of a (Buddhist) heteronormativity and previous readings that argue the film concludes with the Narrator reaching enlightenment.

To begin, *Fight Club*’s narrative takes a circular shape—the concluding scenes return to the opening—that invites interpretation. As noted, Green likens the Narrator to the historical Buddha. Perhaps it would be more precise, however, to relate the character’s life to one of Siddhartha Gautama’s previous lives. Cyclicity is evident in the repeated, yet altered, dialogue between the two central characters in the opening and conclusion. Referring to the forthcoming explosions, Tyler asks in both sequences: “Would you like to say a few words to mark the occasion?” The preface to this question in the opening (“This is it. Ground Zero”) diverges slightly when repeated in the ending (“This is it. The beginning. Ground Zero”). Here, the script negates the possibility of a conclusion. The end returns to and becomes “the beginning.” Equally suggestive, the Narrator’s initial answer (“I can’t think of anything)

is restated (“I still can’t think of anything”) prompting Tyler to quip, “Ah. Flashback humor.” The audience watches again a sequence that the characters have already lived.

We might consider the Tyler/Narrator homoerotic relationship as alluding to that of the Buddha/Ānanda told in the Jātaka tales. Drawing from the work of John Garret Jones, José Ignacio Cabezón (37) offers a brief summary of the Buddha’s relations with his disciple in previous lives:

Here, in explanation of the Buddha’s close ties to his disciple and attendant, Ānanda, the texts depict a variety of past-life scenarios that are touching and at times homoerotically suggestive. In one of these the Buddha and Ānanda are depicted as two deer who “always went about together . . . ruminating and cuddling together, very happy, head to head, nozzle to nozzle, horn to horn.” In another, they are the two handsome young sons of Brahmin parents who refuse to marry so that they may remain with each other. . .

Thus, we may be tempted to consider the Buddha and the Narrator as progressing along a linear path leading to, over the course of multiple lifetimes, a heteronormative enlightenment experience. After all, Siddhārtha Gautama married a woman, Yasodharā, and the Narrator’s liberation coincides with his resolve to take Marla’s hand. But, such a reading would ultimately prove perilous as it requires us to ignore the fact that Siddhārtha renounced his marriage as well as the spliced single frame that flashes on the screen before the end credits roll. Examining the intersections of Buddhist motifs and a cinematic depiction of sexuality—or gender—necessitates acknowledgement of the ambiguity and contradictions embedded in Buddhist texts (Sponberg; Gross;

Cabezón; Coreless 1998; Harris; Langenberg; Michaelson). In terms of homosexuality Cabezón posits:

Despite the ambivalence concerning homosexuality in Buddhist history, the evidence seems to suggest that as a whole Buddhism has been for the most part neutral on the question of homosexuality. The principal question for Buddhism has not been one of heterosexuality vs. homosexuality but one of sexuality vs. celibacy (30).

Jay Michaelson laments the lack of LGBTQ representation in Buddhist scripture and literature stating: “. . . when queer people interact with the dharma, there is often something missing: visibility.” Similarly, Buddhist readings that ignore *Fight Club*'s portrayal—or rather construction—of sexuality (despite whatever the authors' intentions) render what might be considered queer invisible. We should not only consider these interpretations as possessing a heteronormative quality/ (bias) but also probe the implications of the “intertextual” relationship they have with the “extra-text” (running commentaries and interviews with the director, actors, screenwriter and others involved in the production) included in the *Fight Club* DVD package, which, according to Brookey and Westerfelhaus, functions variably to dismiss, deny or distract the viewer from the homoerotic content in a film that did not fare well at the box office and initially received scathing reviews. In other words, the “extra-text” helps refashion *Fight Club* to make it more marketable to a heterosexist audience.

. . . the *Fight Club* DVD constructs a digital closet that provides pleasures associated with such eroticism while at the same time assuaging any guilt that might potentially accompany such pleasure on the part of homophobic and/or heterosexist

consumers (ibid. 38).

In making this argument, Brookey and Westerfelhaus begin by quoting from a transcript of an interview with Edward Norton at Yale University included in the DVD package (ibid. 21). The authors' focus is on Norton's insistence that the film's "moral ambivalence" was meant to provoke. That interview is significant for other further reasons; namely the actor's comparing Tyler with another object of transgressive sexual desire, *The Graduate's* Mrs. Robinson, and his claim that David Fincher often invoked a Buddhist parable.

But to me it was almost like a drug metaphor, it's like watching the people I know who get on a heroin kick and think to themselves, "You know, I'm living outside. I'm a cowboy and I look sexy because of this and this is making me. I'm a renegade and cowboy."

And they wake up one day and realize they're deteriorating. That's what interested me. This kind of seduction of the negative. Like, you know, sort of Tyler as Mrs. Robinson. This exploration that has consequence, terrible, terrible, consequence and that you have to do is wake up from it and ultimately reject it to get to a sort of new middle ground. And Fincher was always talking about how, you know, there's sort of this Buddhist parable, if you have to kill your parents and then you have to kill God and then you have to kill your teacher and how my character sort of gives up on everything that his parents have expected him to engage in.

Tyler gets him to give up on God, but ultimately he has to give up on Tyler and give up on the excesses of what Tyler is suggesting that men ought to be . . .

Essentially, Norton establishes the groundwork for Buddhist interpretations. (Notably Reed and Seton quote from other interviews with the auteurs). As has been demonstrated, scholars similarly portray Tyler—in Norton’s words—as an “excessive” alter-ego, who ultimately becomes an obstacle to a Buddhist path. If attention had been given to Norton’s reference to Mrs. Robinson, this “extra-text” might have indeed proven to be a suitable starting point to investigate the fusing of Buddhist motifs into a film laced with homoeroticism. *The Graduate*’s Benjamin Braddock and the unnamed *Fight Club* Narrator are seduced by transgressive dominant figures. Braddock’s affair with a married older woman violates social norms and the Narrator’s relation with Tyler disrupts the heterosexist order. The conclusion of both films finds the respective protagonist in the throes of chaos struggling to embrace a relationship with a juxtaposed socially acceptable character: Elaine (Mrs. Robinson’s daughter) and Marla. It would take a far stretch to interpret Norton’s comparison “of Tyler as Mrs. Robinson” as not having a sexual connotation and not reading that comment as “Tyler as the Narrator’s lover.”

The *Fight Club* DVD does, however, go to great lengths to deny or dismiss the homoerotic subtext. Brookey and Westerfelhaus theorize that DVD “extra-text,” given its accessibility to invested consumers, differs from what was previously considered as “secondary texts” (criticism, interviews, etc.) that did not enjoy such close proximity to the feature film.

Primary and secondary texts are usually physically distinct from one another and are often read at different times, creating an intertextual relationship that is marked by both temporal and spatial distance. However, by including such distinct but

interrelated texts in a self-contained package, the DVD turns this intertextual relationship into an intratextual relationship (ibid. 23).

The result of this relationship—at least in the case of *Fight Club*—is a return to auteurism, giving filmmakers a privileged position to not only interpret the film for the viewer but also counter other competing readings and/or unfavorable reviews, which in turn presents critics with new challenges (ibid. 27). What is interesting about Buddhist readings of *Fight Club* is that they (unwittingly) perpetuate the messaging/ (agenda) of the auteurs. Put simply, these readings are complicit in rendering the film heteronormative via omission of any discussion of homoeroticism. Moreover, just as Fincher and Norton relate the film to a “Buddhist parable,” Green employs *Fight Club* as a means to introduce the basic tenets of Buddhism. The introduction of Green’s book *Buddhism Goes To The Movies* is quite explicit in relaying the potential that film has for Buddhist pedagogy (xvi). Instead of (passively) validating the film, Buddhist (scholar) (-) (practitioner)s might do well to heed Henry A. Giroux’s denouncement of *Fight Club*’s “public pedagogy” for being “morally bankrupt” to such an extent that it demands to be approached via a “pedagogy of disruption”—to critically interrogate and challenge the film’s messaging and contextual backdrop.

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