

Narcissism, Masochism and the Reconstituted Male—Masculine Performances in *Fight Club* and *The Wrestler*

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Abstract

The article reads David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) and Darren Aronofsky's film *The Wrestler* (2008) as films that deploy masochistic spectacles of heroically suffering white men. Both Fincher and Aronofsky are well known for their dark and sometimes surreal films that frequently take up violence as a theme (Mayshark, 2007). They are also prominent auteurial voices, nominated for and winning multiple prominent film awards. Both Fincher and Aronofsky are, the article argues, representatives of a class of American directors who, starting in the early 1990s, made independent art house films and won accolades at various film festivals, making anti-mainstream, if not subversive cinema. These filmmakers of the 1990s sustained the spirit of enquiry that was the hallmark of the auteurs of the New Hollywood age.

Our contention is that Fincher's *Fight Club* and Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* can be accommodated on this list as films made by subversive filmmakers and that they share common features owing to their commitment to explore constructions of masculinity and performances of the same. The question that the article seeks to address is—does David Savran's framework offered in *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (1998) predict the distinct male posturing of masochistically suffering white men visible in *Fight Club* and *The Wrestler*? The article will primarily use the theoretical framework offered by David Savran to examine where *Fight Club* and *The Wrestler* are situated with respect to the mainstream Hollywood fare featuring hyper-masculine heroes.

Keywords

Masculinity, gender performance, consumerism, violence, subversion

The 1980s in Hollywood was an era that saw a surge in the popularity of films depicting representations of mass violence. The narratives in some of the more popular films in this decade were cleverly designed

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as star vehicles, involving the stereotype of individual men pitted against overwhelming hostile forces and deploying an extraordinary degree of violence and destruction to overcome them. Notable examples include—*Rambo First Blood* (1982) and *First Blood—Part II* (1985) with Sylvester Stallone, *Commando* (1986) with Arnold Schwarzenegger and *Missing in Action I and II* (1984, 1985) with Chuck Norris. These hyper-masculine warriors of the cinematic glitterati stormed fearlessly into alien territory and demolished everything in sight using grenades and Gatling guns. The spectators watched, in the words of Eric Lichtenfeld, ‘hardware using hardware to destroy hardware’ (2004, p. 66). The narrative structures of these hyper-masculine performances were analogous to the Proppian description of the Oedipus complex. They were structured as ‘obstacles to be overcome, territories to be won and tests to be achieved’ (Rutherford, 1992, p. 183), perhaps produced as a knee-jerk reaction to salvage America’s patriarchal pride and victory culture that took a toll in Vietnam.

Even though such notions regarding a violent and triumphant masculinity were interrogated through some of the post-Vietnam movies of a previous generation in films such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), this vacillating representation of American masculinity could only hint at the shaky grounds of its establishment. ‘The problem is the lack of social confirmation or proof of genuine “masculine identity”’, observes Lynne Segal. ‘...consequently, North America is now apparently populated by confused, insecure and anxious, “makeshift males”’ (1990, p. 131). Reflexively, masochistic spectacles of heroically suffering white men had perhaps become the key trope in subsequent Hollywood action cinema. For Paul Smith, the cyclical narrative triad of the (de)-eroticization of the male body, through physical punishment and near destruction, leading eventually towards a process of regeneration and re-masculinization, forms the ‘orthodox structuring code of contemporary Hollywood action movies’ (1993, p. 239). It is this reflexive masochism and a manifest narcissism that could well be the new informing logic of Hollywood masculinities of the new millennium. This article attempts a study of David Fincher’s *Fight Club* (1999) and Darren Aronofsky’s film *The Wrestler* (2008) that appear to employ this new logic in representing Hollywood masculinities.

David Fincher, well known for his dark and stylishly made thrillers like *Seven* (1995), *Fight Club* (1999) and *Zodiac* (2007) has been nominated twice for Best Director for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) and *The Social Network* (2010) at the Academy Awards, winning the Golden Globe and BAFTA for the latter. Scholars like Jesse Mayshark have identified consistent themes of ‘paranoia, isolation and disruption’ in Fincher’s films and that ‘The intrusion of the unexpected on predictable, affluent American life—a major subject of *Fight Club*—is prominent in *The Game* (1997) and *Panic Room* (2002) as well’ (2007, p. 162). Darren Aronofsky’s work is also characterized by disturbing, bleak and often surreal themes, which appropriate internal and psychological violence. After garnering strong reviews for *Requiem for a Dream* (2000 which was based on the novel by the same name written by Hubert Selby Jr.), that established him as a major auteurial voice, he directed his third film *The Fountain* (2006) which, like Fincher’s *Fight Club*, received mixed reviews, performed poorly at the box office but went on to do well on DVD and garnered a cult following, reinforcing his position as an auteur with a distinct filmmaking style. His fourth and fifth films, *The Wrestler* (2008) and *Black Swan* (2010) received further acclaim and were nominated for multiple awards including the Academy Awards, the Golden Globes, BAFTA and a Directors Guild of America nomination.

In true auteurist fashion, he collaborates often with cinematographer Matthew Libatique and film composer Clint Mansell, who has worked with Aronofsky on all five of his films. Despite the consistency in his style and subject, Aronofsky adopts a markedly different, subtle directing style in *The Wrestler* and *Black Swan*, which highlights the actors’ performances and emphasizes the narrative using a mostly muted palette of colours.

Both Fincher and Aronofsky can be taken as representatives of a class of American directors who, starting in the early 1990s emerged through the independent art house and festival circuit making

anti-mainstream, if not subversive cinema. These 'subversive' filmmakers of the 1990s sustained the spirit of defiance and enquiry that was the hallmark of the auteurs of the New Hollywood age. Their films mostly examined questions of ethics and morality, American patriarchal pride and nostalgic heroism, and focused on the cause and effects of disintegrating families and social alienation. 'The dominant politics of (these directors of the 90s) was inward-looking—concerned with issues of identity, race and gender, sexual orientation—and that is reflected in these movies, with their emphasis on individual struggles and existential crises,' observes Mayshark (2007, p. 11).

While the New Hollywood directors experimented with cinema and produced films that documented the major cultural phenomena of the late 1960s and early 1970s (the anti-Vietnam sentiment, Stonewall, Civil Rights and Woodstock), their present-day counterparts also demonstrate a love of popular culture, inter-textual references and a general liberty with plot structure. 'Where *Pulp Fiction* was ultimately a movie about movies (and about TV shows, and pop music, and pop culture), films like Wes Anderson's *Bottle Rocket* (1996) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997) were ultimately about their characters' (Mayshark, 2007, p. 5). Among the other major filmmakers who rose into prominence during the 1990s were Richard Linklater (*Slacker* [1991], *Dazed and Confused* [1993], *A Scanner Darkly* [2006]), Todd Haynes (*Poison* [1991], *Safe* [1995], *Far from Heaven* [2002], *I'm Not There* [2007]), David O. Russell (*Spanking the Monkey* [1994], *Three Kings* [1999], *The Fighter* [2010], *The Silver Linings Playbook* [2012]), etc.

Fincher's *Fight Club* and Aronofsky's *The Wrestler* are both films that can be comfortably accommodated on this list as films made by subversive filmmakers and they are also similar owing to their commitment to exploring masculinities and performances of the same. *Fight Club*'s take on blatant consumerism as a solution to the emasculation of American men will also be examined in the light of discussions on consumer capitalism and an attempt will also be made to analyze the films on the basis of their latent masochistic, narcissistic and camp suggestions, drawing from Savran, Susan Sontag and the insightful analysis of *Fight Club* done by Henry Giroux (2003). It will also attempt a critique of Robert Bly's thesis (2004) on the absence/loss of masculine role models, the dominance of maternal figures and initiation rituals through a discussion of the 'postmodern cut' as posited by Žižek (2000). The article aims to explore the aesthetics, narratives and rhetorical strategies of these films, all of which engage with the codes of masculinity in a subversive and interrogative fashion, reading both the films as Hollywood's take on what has been dubbed as the so-called 'crisis of masculinity', at the turn of the century.

The films are an oddly ambivalent representation; both a celebration and critique of the 'macho' American male and the increasingly commodified and mediated culture that emerged after the 1980s. Central to both the films is the logic of aggressive violence—external and internal—incorporated in a distinctively subversive masochistic manner. The centrality of a performative male body is also a key feature in both the films. In epics, adventure and sports films, the male body is connotative of power and strength, often celebrated as a manly spectacle, observes Beynon—'Masculinity is defined in terms of being tough and selfless, having courage, guts and endurance, a lack of squeamishness, a high resistance to pain and discomfort and tight control in emotional matters' (2002, p. 67). There was a time when blue-collar workers could invest in a kind of honour and the mythology of hard physical work. However, former steelworkers are now parking cars, waiting tables, or as in the case of *Fight Club*, watching security monitors and former 'wrestlers' (who conspicuously *perform* the spectacle of a violent manhood) are forced to acknowledge redundancy. The solace of big muscles is not quite enough to construct their identities and salve their bruised egos. In addition, as a character says in *Fight Club*, they lack a great cause, like a war or an economic depression, with which to test themselves. What the men in *Fight Club* and Randy 'The Ram' in *The Wrestler* perform are unadulterated acts of masculine virility in its purest form. The narratives of both the films largely concern the motif of establishing/retrieving masculine

identities. However, it is not language and articulation that the male protagonists grapple on to, but their bodily agency and a heady mix of ‘hypermasculinity-induced-anarchy’.

Both *Fight Club* and *The Wrestler* are welcome reconsiderations of the notion of a masculine gender performance. The dystopian vision of America as a dream world without suburbs, shopping malls and real women in *Fight Club* punctures holes in the notion of redemption and closure through acts of aggression, which has been, for long, the hegemonic male performative strategy. In a culture that has been robbed of its masculine principle, fighting and wounding are the only means by which the men in the titular ‘Fight Club’ feel truly alive. The emasculating crisis in *Fight Club* and indeed in the late 1990s is rooted in the transformation of the male self from an agent of production to a receptacle for consumption. In *Alienation and Freedom* (1964), sociologist Robert Blauner articulates that industrial workers experienced feelings of powerlessness (having no control over their actions on the job), meaninglessness (performing specialized tasks that they could not relate to the ‘whole’), isolation (having no identification with the firm) and self-estrangement (no integration between work and life). *Fight Club* is informed by all the major themes of Blauner’s study. The unnamed protagonist, self-nomenclated as ‘Jack’, experiences all the symptoms of a dissatisfied worker: powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and estrangement; which are voiced through his engagement with support groups for patients recovering from various illnesses. This idea is reinforced as the narrative progresses and we see the protagonist desperately attempting to generate meaning through an alter ego—Tyler Durden; the corollary of his psychotic trauma and Dissociative Identity Disorder.

According to Blauner (1964), the feelings of meaninglessness and estrangement experienced by men at the workplace forced them to search for identity and affirmation outside the workplace, in the realm of consumption. Jack is the everyman, ‘an emasculated, repressed, corporate drone whose life is simply an extension of a reified and commodified culture’ (Giroux, 2003, p. 62). A cultural malaise lay at the heart of American mythmaking; an anxiety that sprang directly from the blind pursuit of marketplace masculinity. In many critical contexts, consumerism is used to describe the tendency of people to identify strongly with products or services they consume, especially those with commercial brand names and a perceived status-symbol appeal, embodied in such examples as in a luxury car, designer clothing or expensive jewellery. In his prophetic paper on American consumer capitalism titled ‘Price Competition in 1955’, economist Victor Lebow discussed the cost of maintaining the American lifestyle of booming consumerism:

The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms. The greater the pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats—his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies. (1955, p. 3)

The film presents itself as a critique of contemporary consumerism and how corporate culture positions men in jobs and lifestyles that are a threat to their hegemonic masculine roles leaving them to seek refuge in self-help groups. These self-help groups serve the purpose of being nothing more than a ‘dreaded cult of victimhood’ as Giroux observes. Jack, starved for emotional release, begins attending new age support groups for diseases he does not have, a place where it is acceptable to hug strangers and cry at random.

A morbid fear of emasculation runs through the entire narrative of *Fight Club*. Jack’s enrolment at the testicular cancer support group is the earliest example in the film of this proclivity. The men in the group (including a large, ‘previously hyper-masculine’ man—Bob) all have their testes removed and suffer

consequences, including an oestrogen surge that causes Bob to develop breasts and cry at random, no doubt a signal of his emasculating effiteness. ‘Bitch tits’ on Bob, played by Meat Loaf could have interesting connotations considering the relatively low female representation in the film and the pervading threat of emasculation that grips the male characters in the film. After the narrator’s condo is destroyed in a self-rigged explosion he rings up his new friend, Tyler Durden who comforts him saying—‘It could be worse. A woman could cut off your penis while you’re sleeping and throw it out the window of a moving car.’ Even the punishment that awaits any defectors from Project Mayhem—the anarchist operation planned by the Fight Club members—is castration.

Maternal and paternal figures are also conspicuously absent in the film. In *Fight Club*, father figures are distant and disengaged while mothers are non-existent and despised even in reference. ‘We are a generation of men raised by women, I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer we need,’ muses Tyler. In a narrative of absent fathers and hated mothers, Fincher brilliantly weaves in the picture of an insomniac; a self-confessed ‘30 year old boy’ who cries on the breasts of ‘Bitch-titted-Bob’ and then exclaims the morning after his cathartic support-group participation—‘Babies don’t sleep this well!’

Patriarchy and the presence of a father figure (the classic signifier of masculinity and patriarchy) is upset in the film’s narrative. Mothers (again, plainly not in attendance, though existing as a menacing, ‘absent’ presence) have usurped the position of absent fathers in contemporary times. The idea that this absence of mentoring father figures is an important explanation for the soft, feminized and consumerist men (represented by Jack in *Fight Club*) is one that is addressed by Robert Bly’s thesis in his cult-inspiring *Iron John* (1990). Bly is also the leading proponent of the Mythopoetic Men’s Movement in America. As Donna Peberdy explains—‘The father or father figure, as Bly’s pseudo-Freudian reading suggests, is central to the process of initiating boys into manhood, thus the rejection of the mother is a necessary step in reclaiming masculinity’ (2010, p. 236). Bly’s thesis of the absence/loss of masculine role models, the dominance of maternal figures and initiation rituals (explained below as the ‘postmodern cut’) all find expression in Fincher’s film. The crisis of manhood experienced in America at the turn of the century, argues Bly, is a result of the absence of fathers around their sons. Lacking a mentor to ‘initiate’ them into manhood, the inadequacy of the young males is aggravated by the increasing dominance of women in men’s lives (‘I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer we need’). Bly writes—‘When we walk into a contemporary house, it is often the mother who comes forward confidently. The father is somewhere else in the back, being inarticulate’ (2004, p. 21). In *Fight Club*, Tyler and Jack face a fate that is worse, for there is no back room into which the Father has retreated. He is absent altogether.

One of the pivotal scenes in the film is a moment of intimacy between Jack and Tyler when they confide that their fathers are distant and disengaged. ‘God as the father maybe one of (the) most powerful mythologies,’ observes Segal (1990, p. 28). However, what happens when this myth is undermined, or worse still, ceases to exist? Jack’s father had left when he was a small boy, married subsequent wives and has had subsequent families. He says that his father was not able to adequately answer his series of questions on ‘now what?’ The existentialist echoes of the question are hard to ignore. With the lack of a male role model, all that is left for the American boy without a father is to resort to the ‘consumer product’. When there is no other solution, Jack turns to a ‘modern versatile domestic solution’ to fill the void. In a short but important scene, we see Jack flipping through an IKEA furniture catalogue, staring at a full-page photo of an entire kitchen and dining room set. Fincher communicates the idea through a voice-over for Jack—‘I would flip and wonder, what kind of dining room set *defines* me as a person?’

With his addiction to self-help groups, Jack attends a leukaemia group and experiences a guided meditation. When he is told to meet his power animal in one meditation, he finds a penguin in a snowy

cave who speaks like a child—a poignant image of Jack’s lonely and docile masculinity. In an interview by Keith Thompson, ‘What Men Really Want’, Robert Bly captures this over-emphasized docility:

When I look out at my audiences, perhaps half the young males are what I’d call soft. They’re lovely, valuable people. I like them—and they’re not interested in harming the earth, or starting wars, or working for corporations. There’s something favorable toward life in their whole general mood and style of living. But something’s wrong. There’s not much energy in them. They are life-preserving but not exactly life-giving. (Thompson, 1991, p. 32)

Jack wants to get out of his dead-end corporate job and his IKEA-furnished lifestyle. Because he lacks the courage of his own, he creates a shadow that has enough nerve to break free and enough audacity to become his own true individual. On some levels, Fincher’s film exists to serve as a signpost; a cautionary sign of the times for men anxious about the now-redundant, archetypal male roles at the turn of the century. At the same time, it revels in the mayhem that it portrays. Tyler Durden (or more correctly, ‘Jack’) is not a sociopath along the likes of Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976); he is just a leader of undervalued, insecure, anxious men who are uncomfortable with their effeminizing existence. The film ‘suggests that the violence perpetrated by its characters—from bloody, bare-knuckles brawling to outright urban terrorism—is rooted in deep social disconnects’ (Mayshark 2007, p. 165).

Jack creates Tyler Durden as a mentoring father figure who will help integrate his self with sex and violence. He is a mythic mentor figure intent on re-claiming masculine performative roles that are now non-existent. Tyler’s character has clear resonances of the Cultural Masculism of the 1990s, championed by Bly’s Mythopoetic Men’s Movement. The Mythopoetic Men’s Movement also has semblances to the Jungian understanding of masculine psychology. Jung theorized in *Aspects of the Masculine* (1989) that the Hero delivers himself from the Mother archetype (and thus from the infantile ‘Unconscious’ to a ‘Conscious’ personality) only to encounter the demands of the Anima. The Anima archetype, usually represented by a woman closer in age to the man than his mother, was Jung’s central discovery in the field of masculine psychology. For him, ‘the Hero myth expresses the ego’s desire to replace dependency upon the unconscious with self-direction—a purpose that necessitates an ambivalent struggle with the Mother, who symbolises the unconscious’ (1989, p. 9). Separation from the mother, a heroic conquest, a scarring wound—all enabled men to reclaim their lost ‘warrior’. Separation then was the answer. It meant freedom from the infantile unconscious and freedom from maternal figures—something Bly and Jung deemed necessary for men to establish their masculinities. In *Fight Club*, this idea is maintained and reinforced through the character of Tyler Durden.

Tyler Durden is everything the narrator wishes he could be; a performer of masculine roles and the mentor of a manhood that perhaps ceased to exist a long time ago. The cool, confident, cultural commentator that is Tyler is the polar opposite of what Jack perceives himself to be. This chance encounter with Tyler Durden leads the narrator to his dramatic change in lifestyle. Finding his meticulously detailed condo mysteriously burned down (including his ‘very respectable’ wardrobe), he decides to move in with Tyler; to one of the more seedier parts of town (suggesting the bi-polarity of his psyche).

Fight Club, a cathartic, underground club for men like Jack and ‘bitch-titted’ Bob, is established. It turns out to be better than the support groups that Jack and Bob attended (though for different reasons). The membership steadily increases despite the number one rule of Fight Club—‘You do not talk about Fight Club’. The frustrated and angry men who join Fight Club punch and pound each other in order to feel male again, to forget about the women who are out there to castrate men (‘... a woman could cut off your penis while you’re sleeping and toss it out the window of a moving car’). The club purports to be an honourable group with its own codes and ethics. However, the Fight Club aggression soon spins out

of control into Project Mayhem—a master plan for unleashing anarchy and destroying the system that's effeminizing men and generating a very real threat of social castration among the men folk. Project Mayhem is Tyler Durden's bizarre scheme to liberate American manhood by destroying credit-card companies. It is however, perhaps no more legitimate than the paradox of the slick and metrosexual Brad Pitt critiquing the Gucci model of masculinity while riding a night bus.

The idea of an inescapable castration anxiety appears to be the governing logic of the film, smoothly encapsulated in a very comic, very disturbing phallogocentric narrative of transgressional mischief. Instances within the film can be read as attempts to reproduce a sort of 'carnavalesque' writing, suggestive of Bakhtin; that is, a 'writing which has taken the carnival spirit into itself and thus reproduces, within its own structures and by its own practice, the characteristic inversions, parodies and discrownings of carnival proper' (Dentith, 1995, p. 63). The transgressional mischief that Jack and his Tyler component engage in is also an apparently important part of being male.

Tactics of Culture Jamming, directed by Tyler and Jack, are executed to perfection by the volunteering members of Project Mayhem. Lloyd (2010) observes that Culture Jammers are a loosely affiliated group of activists who use a particularly unique medium to strike back at the culture industry and the abusive practices and power of multinational corporations Tyler's band, impersonating a quasi anti-consumerist social movement is seen engaging in frequent acts of defiance of authority and power. Their subversive activities (which are apparently devices of culture jamming) include reversing the spike-strips on parking lots so that tires explode dramatically as unsuspecting drivers exit, urinating in public fountains and on gourmet meals while working as waiters in posh restaurants, letting monkeys loose in town and getting bird droppings on Porsches. These rituals of 'carnavalesque' degradation, may not however echo Bakhtin's politically charged reminders that 'we are all creatures of flesh, and thus of food and faeces also' (Dentith 1995, p. 65). The 'gay relativism' here is perhaps stripped off the attitude in which all official certainties are relativized, inverted or parodied and instead comes off as the carnivalesque performances of Project Mayhem masquerading as tactics for redeeming masculinity. Constant motifs generating castration anxiety pervade the film. There are nagging fears of castration and mutilation built into the film's narrative. Significant among the support groups that Jack initially attends is one for testicular cancer patients. Despite the obvious threat to their male identity and some unfortunate side effects (like 'bitch tits' and a girl's squeaky voice on a champion body-builder), the men huddle together and whisper—'We're still men!'

Jack's shattered dreams are recapitulated by Tyler Durden as every American man's inevitable destiny. Tyler perceives entire generations of men becoming white-collar slaves, 'working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need!'—Jack feels it too. 'I was the warm little centre that the life of this world crowded around,' he muses. America seems to love him, but he feels hurt and betrayed by his culture and the dulled-down consumerist dreams he has inherited. Fincher remarks, 'We're designed to be hunters and we're in a society of shopping. There's nothing to kill anymore, there's nothing to fight, nothing to overcome, nothing to explore. In that societal emasculation this everyman is created' (Smith, 1999). In a culture that has been robbed of its masculine principle, Jack finds himself only accepting his masculinity through tears and the oestrogen-enriched breasts of another man who completes him. The consumer culture is like an obsessive-compulsive disorder for Jack. He observes in one of the film's many monologues:

We're consumers. We're by-products of a lifestyle obsession. Murder, crime, poverty—these things don't concern me. What concerns me is celebrity magazines, television with five hundred channels, some guy's name on my underwear. Rogaine, Viagra, Olestra...

The establishment called 'Fight Club' becomes a cultural inevitability given that 'the strength of anti-militarism has undermined people's acceptance of its unavailability' (Segal 1990, p. 131). Perhaps the growing crisis of masculinity post 1960s found a central expression in the American intervention in Vietnam. Vietnam veterans were perceived as acting out an excessive and false hyper-masculinity. As Kimmel points out, 'once a paragon of virtue, the soldier was now perceived as failed man' (1996, p. 263). Even war could no longer successfully initiate men into manhood. Reflexively, the only way Tyler's followers can become agents in a society that has deadened them is to get in touch with the primal instincts for competition and violence, both of which are hegemonic masculine traits. Fight Club actualizes this possibility; a chance to beat each other senseless—(and) their only recourse to community is to collectively engage in acts of militia inspired terrorism aimed at corporate strongholds' (Giroux, 2003, p. 65). The only apparent way to reclaim a lost masculinity is through the literal destruction of their present selves. Indeed, Tyler vocalizes this sentiment conversing with Jack—'Self-improvement is masturbation, now self-destruction is the answer.'

This masochistic male subjectivity also informs the central narrative in Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler*. Aronofsky credits the 1957 Charles Mingus song 'The Clown' as a major influence on *The Wrestler*. The song itself is structured as a poem that is read over instrumental music and relates the story of a clown, who after discovering the bloodlust of the crowd kills himself at the end of his performance (Foley, 2008).

The self-inflicted violence that differentiates *The Wrestler* from other old-order 'masculine' films such as the Rocky franchise (1976 onwards) or *Bloodsport* (1988) can be understood through the lens of the 'new sado-masochist'. Reflexive sado-masochism offers a unique framework for interpreting masculine ideals. The ability to endure pain is a clichéd trope in discourses of archetypal masculinity (one might recall Rocky Balboa's 'strong jaw' in this context, celebrated and mythified through the Rocky film franchise). Reflexive sado-masochism allows the individual to portray himself as victim while also feeling powerful because of his ability to endure pain. Pain, then, becomes desirable. David Savran posits, 'Concealed under a veneer of righteous indignation, wilfulness, anger, grief, or guilt, and repudiated by the would-be heroic male subject, reflexive sado-masochism has become the primary libidinal logic of the white male as victim' (Savran, 1998, p. 210).

Randy 'The Ram' Robinson, the titular wrestler, is an individual warped between the polarities of a bygone era of stardom and the present realities of failing health, failing relationships and a failing career—all metaphorically rendering him impotent. Endurance and the ability to withstand pain outside the ring becomes the only means by which the individual and his masculinity can be saved. There is great authenticity to many aspects of Randy's pain and battered mind and spirit. He persistently seeks acceptance—from his estranged daughter, from his stripper girlfriend, his dwindling number of wrestling fans and even the random assortment of deli customers when he gives up wrestling. Randy's pitiable state of existence and fall from the golden age is constantly highlighted in the narrative.

Once a giant in the world of professional wrestling (as the scenes accompanying the opening credits substantiate), Randy had inspired video games, action figures and performed in top arenas like the Madison Square Garden. However, he is later reduced to eking out a living by performing 'choke slams' and 'pile drivers' for a handful of wrestling fans and high-school kids. The film's opening credits are rolled over shots of Randy's memorabilia from his heyday. A commentator's lines—'...a true American, the people's hero...Randy "The Ram" Robinson!'—and the cheers and applause of frenzied fans coupled with newspaper clips and reports of Randy's victory streak and multiple showdowns against his heel,¹ 'The Ayatollah' paint a picture of glamour, power, popularity and success that is almost immediately undermined as the film opens.

Randy's establishing shot opens with a fade in. We find him sitting in a room that is clearly a kindergarten classroom, complete with painted walls and discarded toys. The image is paradoxical and suggestive of multiple binaries. He looks absurdly large and out of place in a room full of toys, posters and little furniture. Even his sensibility and taste is shown to be outmoded when later, recovering from a surgery, he tries to amuse a schoolboy by inviting him over to play an old and outdated Nintendo video game featuring himself—Randy 'The Ram' Robinson. The boy, who is growing up playing *Call of Duty*—role-playing as a US Marine posted in Iraq—is clearly unimpressed. Randy barely makes enough money to pay the meagre rent on his trailer-park house in New Jersey. He has no family or a real home. His estranged daughter and his inability to sustain meaningful relationships are perhaps a result of his exclusive faith and dependence on his hyper-masculinity. Unable to face the corollaries of his actions in the real world, he lives in the wake of a celebrated but obsolete masculine performance of power and show blitz. Only when his body fails him does he become aware of the failure of his logic. A heart attack, the symbol of his senility and impotence briefly incapacitates him thereby leaving him a chance to interrogate the governing principle of his existence. However, Randy has been so damaged by the restrictive ideology of an obsolete masculinity that he must go back to the ruins of his heyday to feel alive once again. He is a performing junkie addicted to assurances of his masculinity. Randy is more a performing star rather than a violent fighter. 'The performative aspects of masculinity bring it close to acting and the star persona,' observes Bingham (1994, p. 15). In *The Wrestler*, masculinity and histrionics are synonymous.

The concept of camp can be easily associated with the male strategies of social management seen in *The Wrestler*. Brought into modern cultural discussion with her 'Notes on Camp' in 1964 by Susan Sontag, one of the defining features of camp is its view of 'being-as-playing-a-role', the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre (Carlson, 2004, p. 166). Camp is theatrical not only on emphasising role-playing, but also in emphasizing performance and style, including how the self looks and how it is done. Randy figures repeatedly in the film's narrative sprucing up for his 'performance'. He wears glittering spandex, dyes his hair blond and even goes to tanning salons. However, this is just the beginning of his camp performance. The *coup de grace* is his own mutilation of his body. He has broken razor blades wedged into his costume that he uses to cut himself with and bleeds all over the fighting ring as a part of his performance. The act has resonances of *Fight Club*'s Jack's self-obliteration and his later attempts to 'destroy something beautiful'.

While the fights are choreographed, the pain and blood are frequently real and forced by design. Matches that include such tropes as a staple gun, broken glass, barbed wire and steel chairs are all a part of the show. The wrestlers often inflict themselves with the pain of masochistic torture. As Peter Bradshaw observes in his review of the film for *The Guardian*:

Randy smuggles a razor blade into the ring, and though it isn't what you might think, the resulting episode speaks volumes about the self-harm, self-doubt, self-hate and tatty addiction that underpins the whole business. The bout that finally brings on Randy's cardiac arrest is a truly revolting X-treme match, featuring blunt implements, barbed wire and staple guns fired into pudgy chests—the staples have to be removed after the show by an on-site medic. Randy and his fellow grapplers are basically demi-snuff porn actors. (Bradshaw, 2009)

The cuts of apparent masochism and self-mutilation in *The Wrestler* are not much different from the cuts of ritual initiation performed on Jack by Tyler. During the process of making soap at home (from rich women's 'fat asses'), Tyler grabs hold of Jack's hand and subjects it to a 'chemical kiss'. His skin starts peeling off from the chemical reaction, leaving a noticeable scar in its wake. Similar burns and cuts are later seen on the hands of the 'Project Mayhem' soldiers. The 'cut', thus becomes an important

feature of the initiation ritual into Tyler's club for men (no longer just *Fight Club* or *Project Mayhem*, but one of infinitely more liberatory scope for men who feel inadequate). The cuts in both the films, however, are different from what Slavoj Žižek calls the traditional cut. In *The Ticklish Subject*, he points out the difference between the post-modern cut and the traditional one:

The traditional cut ran in the direction from the Real to the Symbolic, while the postmodern cut runs in the opposite direction, from the Symbolic to the Real. The aim of the traditional cut was to inscribe the symbolic form on the raw flesh, to 'gentrify' raw flesh, to mark its inclusion into the big Other, its subjection to it. The aim of postmodern sado-maso practices of bodily mutilation is, rather, the opposite one—to guarantee, to give access to the 'pain of existence', the minimum of the bodily Real in the universe of Symbolic simulacra. (Žižek 2000, p. 372)

Randy's case is essentially one of an identity crisis. Robin Ramsinski assumes the character of Randy 'The Ram' Robinson. Like Bane, his muscles are pumped with steroids; his long-grown hair is dyed blond. Contained within this facade of the 'Ram' is the real man—Randy the performer. However, the logic of this ruse falls apart when he is no longer able to maintain the illusion. His crisis stems from the belief that he is a 'broken down piece of meat' that nobody wants. Forced into retirement from an 'occupational hazard'—a heart attack that is brought on as a result of his performance in the ring, he struggles to establish a connection with people. He is rejected by the neighbourhood kids, his estranged daughter and his stripper friend, Pam. The only time he succeeds in forming a bond is after a night of heavy drinking. Even this one-night stand with a young girl becomes a performance for Randy. He has to dress up and perform as a fireman in order to be a man. Randy's character is a choreographed wrestler who offers more entertainment than sport or substance. Randy's dyed-blond hair, his tanning sprays and salons and his glittering green Spandex trousers all foreground his identity as performer, while remaining suggestive of the 1980s stadium rock culture. His attempt to impersonate a rock star is also reflected in the histrionics of his act and the rock track that precedes his theatrical entrance into the ring.

The film features an original soundtrack by Bruce Springsteen titled '*The Wrestler*', played over the film's closing credits that conforms to the theme of the film. It stands out in stark contrast to the kind of loud, heavy metal notes that usually typify the theme songs of professional wrestlers (played subversively through the opening credits of the film), thus underscoring the interrogative intent of the film. The song sums up the film thematically, and maintains and elaborates the thesis of the opening shot.

The film ends with a freeze-frame shot of Randy performing one of his signature moves—a leap from atop the ropes of the ring—'the Ram Jam'. The blackout that devours this frame symbolically ties up the film's narrative as the film opens with a fade-in, while at the same time, resisting narrative closure. The shot is suggestive. Perhaps Randy is to be perceived as committing suicide in effect by participating in one final match with the Ayatollah, his heel.

Conclusion

Both *Fight Club* and *The Wrestler* end with a murder/suicide binary. Jack and Randy both kill off their alter egos, Tyler and The Ram. While Jack eliminates Tyler Durden in an apparent attempt to reclaim his life and reassess his sanity, Randy kills off The Ram, the man who lost his sanity in the reality of what life had to offer him. The irony however lies in the fact that, resurrecting Randy and Jack must inevitably involve their own obliteration.

In both the films, inflicting pain on the body becomes a means of exhibiting endurance through discounting visual signifiers like blood, cuts and bruises. Wounding the self is a way to experience the certainty of existence known only through pain. Fighting and wounding are the only means by which the men can feel truly 'alive'. Savran's discussion on emergence of the masochistic male subjectivity is validated through the films. The 'new-narcissist or new sado-masochist is now a dominant figure in U.S. culture and is no longer located in the margin' (1998, p. 163). In the aftermath of such rituals of mutilation and disfigurement, all that remains is; in the words of Sally Robinson, 'an enduring image of the disenfranchised white male (which) has become a symbol for the decline of the American way' (2000, p. 2). This new, narcissistic/masochistic male is perhaps a symbol of the 'crisis of the masculinity' widely experienced and reported at the turn of the century in America.

Both *The Wrestler* and *Fight Club* are dominated by the performative bodies of white American masculinity, desperately wanting out of the crisis and the failure of the masculine performative strategies that they grapple on to. The films could be read as odes on death of the 'Great White American Male' and might help in interpreting and responding to an obvious shift in contemporary American culture and society. Interestingly, Aronofsky maintains that *The Wrestler* is in essence, a companion piece to his own *Black Swan* (2010). The performers that he focuses on in both the narratives are completely consumed by their performances, which are largely derived from archetypal gender notions. Comparing the films, he remarks in an interview—'What was amazing to me was how similar the performers in both of these worlds are. They both make incredible use of their bodies to express themselves' (Ditzian, 2010).

In both the films, the American dream is in danger of turning into a nightmare and no amount of aggressive hyper-masculine performances can save the day, thereby marking a failure of all masculine formulae of redemption that would in most other cases usher in an indispensable closure to the films' narratives.

Thus, through narratives of obliteration and masochistic violence, what these films foreground is perhaps a new approach to the posturing of America's anxious, insecure and 'makeshift males'. The 'heroic', here is replaced by the spectacle of 'heroically suffering' men. Physical punishment is directed *inward* and all that the men can hope for is a process of regeneration and re-masculinization. The myth of a stable, towering, stoic masculinity that informed much of Hollywood's blockbusters is consciously done away with and replaced by a conscious act of camp on one hand and schizophrenia on the other.

Consistent with Giroux's thesis, violence in these films is treated unlike any other typical Hollywood fare which remains 'largely formulaic and superficially visceral, designed primarily to shock, titillate and celebrate the sensational' (2003, p. 70). Violence here is more than ritualistic kitsch. It becomes a sport—a crucial component that lets men connect with each other through the overcoming of fear, pain and fatigue—while revelling in the illusion of a redundant masculine culture.

Note

1. A heel is a villain character in wrestling who typically does things to displease the home crowd (Foley, 2000). In the film, 'The Ayatollah' appears as an Iranian character who, as per the fight's design, takes on Randy—'a true American, the people's hero'. Randy is the 'face' of the fight and together, he and his heel perform rehearsed and histrionic moves in the ring where the fight is scripted, but the carnage is real.

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