

Men Retreating Back to the Cave?

by Anne Marie Miller

Let's start by visualizing the male anatomy. What parts of the body are generally stereotyped as masculine? Clearly, beginning at the top one would explain that facial hair depicts masculinity. Next, perhaps one would suggest, a muscular core, complimented by broad shoulder, and strong arms. Finally, in order to wrap up the whole package, (hint, hint) the penis. If one were to dress the same male body in well known designer brands, possibly tone down the muscle ratio, and add a hint of extra sensitivity, what would be the result? The film *Fight Club* by Jim Uhls, suggests that by adding feminine characteristics to a male, despite him having a natural male biology, would make him no longer a *man*. Rather, he would be a product of hyper consumerism and an emotional replica of a woman. As portrayed in *Fight Club*, airing in 1999, traits of masculinity must follow character qualities that one might just associate with a cave man; mindless, emotionless, and savagely tough. Bordo's essay, "Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body," written prior to *Fight Club*, manifests the opposite, that men as portrayed by media, particularly advertisements, are becoming more female in their appearance and overall thought processes. Both *Fight Club* and "Beauty (Re)Discovers the Male Body" recognize the traditional idea of masculinity is changing, yet they differentiate in that *Fight Club* essentially is "fighting" for the reversal of masculinity to its pre 1990's form where men do not partake in consumerism for it is considering innately feminine, whereas in the latter Bordo is arguing against Haggard and *Fight Club* ideals, and for men's right to be able to evolve in their own unique identities. In doing so Bordo fights for individuality and for a positive outlook on both of the sexes.

Fight Club resists evolving male portrayals in the 1990's media by presenting leading role men combating against consumerism, which the film insinuates as feminine, yet realistically does not do much to change society in the film or culture outside of the film. Tyler the most prominent character in *Fight Club* blows up Narrator's apartment in order to prevent him from becoming further consumer driven. By blowing up Narrator's apartment, Tyler begins separating Narrator from media driven society, yet do his attempts really do much to change other men in society or our cultures views on men? The answer waivers. The men in "fight club" are undoubtedly changed by Tyler's ideas of masculinity, but the rest of the world in the film is left unchanged. Men still wear their fancy suits and carry on with their lives as normal in the world of *Fight Club*. More importantly, the majority of today's male culture was not impacted by Tyler's influence. Although some individuals may agree with Tyler's ideas that real men do not engage in our consumer based culture, a vast majority disagree and highly engage in consumerism. Go outside and look around. Men everywhere are highly absorbed in fashion, whether they realize it or not. If one was to ask a random Northeastern male student what brands he was wearing, he might not even recognize that every inch of fabric he is wearing has been coined by a brand name. Despite Tyler's attempts to create an army of consumer combatants in order to destroy companies like banks and retail franchises, he realistically does not make much of an impact, except on his barbaric *Fight Club* members. It seems that *Fight Club* is a direct opposition to the feminized male depicted in Bordo's summary of men during the 1990's. Considering the time frame in which *Fight Club* was written and filmed, it's evident that the writers and directors were attempting to redirect the male image back to its previous creed, prior to men being sexualized

by artists such as Calvin Klein. However, despite their attempts men are still wearing Calvin Klein and many more designer brands to this day. Sorry, Tyler.

Bordo suggests men are adapting to become more thoughtful and comfortable with having an opinion regarding their appearance, yet their acceptance is hindered by brands like Haggar, however male's depicted in *Fight Club* are shown to be mindless, emotionless, brutes who can beat one another nearly to death, without experiencing emotional discomfort. Bordo emphasizes earlier in her essay that men were putting more thought into their appearance, however, later expresses that brands such as Dockers and Haggar were trying to make men feel less feminine by down playing their khakis, through referring to them as "no-nonsense" (Bordo, 209). In a Haggar advertisement, the company goes as far as saying that their pants "don't require a lot of thought" at all (Bordo, 209). Men in the 1990's according to Haggar were not supposed to *think* or for that matter even have emotions. They were almost like machines that wake up, dress, eat, work, eat, undress, and sleep. Repeat cycle. Brands like Haggar, beg me to ask the question of what the advertisers of Haggar really thought of their male patrons. Did they really view them as mindless machines, incapable of creatively dressing themselves? Following their thought process, creativity and possession of a functioning brain is feminine. Perhaps, the advertisers are insinuating that women are the only imaginative intellectuals of society? In which case, I'm sure happy to be a woman. Similar to Haggar's degrading view of men, *Fight Club* also shows their male characters as having absolutely zero emotional depth. The members of "fight club," beat each other ruthlessly until their faces are almost unrecognizable, leaving the men without emotions or faces, the two most known humanly traits. Both *Fight Club* and Haggar, virtually wipe away the existence of men as *actual* human beings that feel and have identities. For example, Narrator, practically kills Angel Face, a member of his own club, and does not feel any remorse towards almost killing someone he sees regularly and also lives with. Finally, after Bob, a member of "fight club," who is supposed to be like a brother to the fellow members is killed and none of them show their pain. They do not even refer to him as his birth name, therefore taking away his identity, as pointed out by Narrator. They dehumanize him once again by treating him as evidence and not a being who once breathed and spoke in the same conversations as them. Men according to *Fight Club*, are not supposed to have emotions whatsoever. They seem to be like mindless ants only working for the benefit of the colony. For Tyler, if one gets squashed, then there are plenty of others to pick and take advantage of. Male depictions according to *Fight Club* and Haggar, simply do not make sense. How are men supposed to be the strongest gender, practically the rulers of the world, without imaginative brains or emotions? It just does not add up. The qualities they continually negate and view as feminine are the realistic qualities that a successful individual is generally thought to possess. The men in "fight club" were not supposed to have thoughts to create individual identities nor were they allowed to further their individuality with material items that expressed their interests.

Fight Club suggests that men should despise consumerism and oppose the idea of investing in material goods to further their identities. In doing so the creators of *Fight Club* present, "Project Mayhem's" whose goal is to obliterate consumer-based companies. The members literally smash and ruin a franchise, blow up a technology store, and light fire to a massive building. Tyler loathes consumerism because he sees it as taking away manhood and making men more feminine. He explains that the men in his "fight club" are the "strongest and smartest" men because they understand that everyone else is working jobs they dislike in order to "buy shit they

don't need" (*Fight Club*). Yet, Tyler is confusing the word "smartest" with actually "mindless." How could an individual be considered the "smartest" when they are against expanding their creativity and engaging in an actual thought process, instead of being ordered around by Tyler the Tyrant? Tyler and his army are the exact opposite of smart, but rather are comparable to empty-headed heathens. Tyler is insinuating that everyone else, meaning women and men who agree with consumerism, who are arguably by Bordo's standards are generally gay men, are all the weak and asinine. Tyler also expresses his hatred of consumerism by assuring that each of his members wears the exact same all black attire. However, does taking away their identity actually combat consumerism? No, instead it just takes away each of the men's individuality and makes them seem even more like a Neanderthal. None of the members of "fight club" are allowed a material item, which takes away their identity further, thus harnessing the idea of what a man should be, thoughtless, strong, and similar to all others. However, men of the world fear no more, Bordo suggests that the debasing of the male mind will be short lived, as society is slowly, but surely evolving.

Bordo argues that men are also becoming more consumer-comfortable in that they are engaging in bettering their appearance and joining together with media advertisements, however their consumer drive is once again being stunted by Haggar's idea of a simplified man. She explains that in order for men to keep up with the ever-evolving woman, he must too take care of his appearance. Meaning, that in the past women, who made the least amount of money, had to look their best in order to attract a male partner to support them. However, now that women are making money and in some situations more than men, the males are now becoming more interested in their appearance, because women no longer need financial support, and can raise their standards, romantically (Bordo, 229). Bordo further argues that, "today, good-looking straight guys are flocking to the modeling agencies, much less concerned about any homosexual taint that will cleave to them" (Bordo, 202). In stating that straight men are becoming more comfortable with becoming male models and therefore adding to the appearance industry, she is suggesting that men are acclimating to societal changes in the 1990's and becoming more relaxed to the idea of being more feminine, in that they take care of their appearance and care about how they look. Yet, men during the 1990's were also holding themselves back. Haggar, predominantly run by men, hindered the male maturation by making it seem that, "real guys don't choose clothing that will enhance the appearance of their bodies or display a sense of style" (Bordo 210). The owners of Haggar, felt that by backtracking men's fashion into a period prior Calvin Klein's endorsement of men's appearance, they would be returning men to their natural place. However, what they failed to realize was by forcing men to all think and look the same "simple" way they were taking away their customer's identity's, by not allowing them to widen their perspective on other types of dress. Haggar was literally telling men who they should be, and therefore not allowing them to grow into who they *could* be or who they *want* to be. Men's perceptions during the 1990's was predominantly that if one were to think too much about really anything, they would be considered feminine; *Fight Club* demonstrates a similar perspective.

Fight Club presents women and men who have feminine traits to be overly emotional and loose ended, and actually lead to a negative conclusion about the idea of both males and females. Marla, the only female lead is shown to be nearly crazy. She walks in front of traffic, medicates her emotions with drugs, and nearly overdoses. She is portrayed as an attention seeking sex object. For example, she calls Narrator to examine her breast in order for him to come and see

her. It is almost as if she cannot get a man's attention if she isn't giving away a piece of herself sexually. To the creators of *Fight Club*, women are manic and sexual objects to men. Their view of women and their definition of femininity is ironic in that they also have a negative view of men as well. It is almost as if in the world of "fight club" neither men nor women are worthy of having actual unique identities. They are all characterized by generic ideas of what men and women should be. Next, *Fight Club* shows Marla as incredibly emotional, in that she cares for both Tyler and Narrator, and tries to help Narrator when she sees his burnt hand. The director of *Fight Club* purposely presents Marla as an exceedingly emotional and manic character to expand on the thought that men are supposed to be thoughtless, while women on the other hand are seen to be melodramatic. (Interesting that once again, both men and women are negated, right?) Bob, whose character has his testicles, clearly a major masculine trait, removed represents a man who gives into femininity. His manhood is removed and in return he adapts breasts, which are obviously incredibly innate to the feminine form. His character is one of a man who really is not much of a man at all once his masculinity is taken, and therefore ends up becoming an extremely emotional person, in other words, feminine, and to make matters worse Bob is the only member of "fight club" who dies. What are the creators of *Fight Club* trying to say? Women and men that are feminine are not going to survive in the world? It seems so considering they not only killed off Bob, but also sent away Marla because she wouldn't be safe in the new world that "fight club" has created. It seems that *Fight Club*, not only views women as inadequate, but also sees men in the same light.

Bordo and *Fight Club* are both interestingly enough, written as result to men's consumerism and society's evolving view of the male appearance in the 1990's. Yet they both pose the question of why certain members of our culture, specifically Haggard and the creators of *Fight Club*, so desperately want to suppress men's roles in society as well as their minds as a whole. More than anything, they have hindered the growth of the gender, by trying to make it impossible for a man to be anything other than the traditional roles that he was supposedly born to fit into. Thus, taking away the right of the individual to actually grow and become not just a mold of another "machine like man," but rather the human being that he was uniquely created to become. Why is it that the *Fight Club* and Haggard view media as a trap that is trying to mold consumers, when that is exactly what they themselves are doing? Perhaps, we as a consumer culture should accept consumerism not as a fixed mold, but as an ever-changing pool of options that allows us to explore our inner workings and embrace our imaginative identities.

Works Cited

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