

Adaptation.

Portfolio Assignment - (CAMF5004)

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“The formal analysis and critical evaluation of a selected adaptation.”

- *Fight Club* (1999) by David Fincher

“The formal analysis and critical evaluation of a selected adaptation.”



FIGHT CLUB

INTRODUCTION:

In nature, adaptation can mean survival. Reforming yourself to better fit the situation of your surroundings. We see it in plants, in animals and in humans. Features that are etched in their physique – a purposeful addition that’s carried their species through generations, right up to the moment in which these features are observed. How does this translate to film? Does it even translate? I say it does, to a point.

Novels are commonly held in high regard as a form of information, mostly attributed to the length of time that the medium has existed. When compared to Film, some would say their status as a piece of storytelling towers above that of cinema. Regarding the adaptation of book to film, many would view the original source material as something that cannot be bested, and an inferior attempt to do so may damage the reputation of such a source. When talking about the film *Adaptation* (2002), Robert Stam (2005) discusses this misconception:

As *Adaptation* demonstrates, one might easily imagine any number of positive tropes for adaptation, yet the standard rhetoric has often deployed an elegiac discourse of loss, lamenting what has been “lost” in the transition from novel to film, while ignoring what has been “gained”. (Robert Stam, 2005).

This is where the comparison of adaptation in media to adaptation in nature falls short. I believe that adaptation of book to film is not one that is actioned in order to maintain the survival of the source material, but rather to transport a story from one media to another, in order to reach an audience which may be unaware of the story’s original source. This is adaptations greatest strength, and regardless of whether such an attempt is successful or not, the original source material stills remains untouched and accessible to the masses.



PALAHNIUK'S STORY / FINCHER'S VISION:

It would be fair to say that Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club* is not a conventional tale, both in writing and structure. Its first-person perspective means the narrative is filtered through the eyes of its name-less protagonist, as he relays his interactions with the world to the reader while simultaneously reflecting on such interactions. It makes for an entertaining read, but one that doesn't directly translate into a screenplay. A book scout for 20th Century Fox agreed, given that its contents included violence, domestic terrorism and underground clubs – not exactly the next *Titanic* (O'Hara, 2009). It begs the question; how does one adapt such material?

Jim Uhl, after some extensive campaigning, landed the job of adapting the book into a workable screenplay for Fox. His approach to writing the script included keeping the voicer over narration, and turning Tyler Durden into a more three-dimensional character, thanks to help from Cameron Crowe (O'Hara, 2009). It was then that a director was needed. Peter Jackson, Danny Boyle and Bryan Singer were all considered for the task, but it was David Fincher who landed the part (Variety, 1997). But what made him the correct choice, aside from his deep interest in the novel?



Figure 1. *Alien 3* (Fincher, 1992)

Figure 2. *Seven* (Fincher, 1995)

Fincher's previous work included the unfair critical failure *Alien 3* (1992) [fig.1] and the much more successful *Seven* (1995) [fig.2]. Despite the different plots and genre, both films share a distinct tone and atmosphere, as well as carefully crafted shots and sublime attention to detail. Although many may not have known at the time, Fincher was refining his skills as an auteur director. With these films on his resume, 20th Century Fox would have likely seen his ability to skilfully handle dark material in a way that doesn't repel the appetite of audiences. Fincher said to the studio, "The real act of sedition is not to do the 3-million-dollar version" – a quote which O'Hara (2009) reads as Fincher wanting to gun for a glossier high-production shoot as oppose to a *Trainspotting*-like feature.

This is Fincher's approach to *Fight Club*.

Adapting the film into something that closely resembles *Trainspotting* (1997) may seem like an obvious direction. Palahniuk's novel and *Trainspotting* are dark and carry themes of people rebelling

against a society which has a certain expectation of them, as well as the story being told from a first-person perspective. But Fincher's approach to the source material has an advantage over the prior mentioned direction – style. More specifically, the glossy, high-production carries an allure, and works in tandem with the story's seduction of the Narrator into an anti-capitalist movement. It also marries well with themes of consumerism - the slick editing and pumping soundtrack could be compared to advertisements seducing consumers into buying their product. Fitting then, that Fincher had already had a hand in directing advertisements previously, whose portfolio included giants such as Coca Cola, Levi's and Nike. Gavin Smith (2009) explores the relationship between his TV commercials and feature films in the quote below:

Fincher's films seemingly repudiate the values he's paid to uphold in his TV commercials. All his features, *Fight Club* especially, seem to be reactions to or commentaries upon the seductive, fabricated realities, spectacles of consumption, and appeals to narcissism and materialism of commercials. The dreamlike suspension, relative freedom from conventions and formats, and formidable technique that distinguish Fincher's sensibility have been honed or acquired from commercials and music videos, with their routinization of spectacle and "style," conceit-based construction and permissiveness in terms of breaking down film grammar conventions. (Smith, 1999).

Having a director, who has an expertise in commercials, adapt a novel whose contents includes a reaction to societies lust for consumerism is more than interesting. In fact, it's the kind of approach to adaptation that justifies its inception in the first place. So, it's clear he knows how to sell a product, so how does he (and Fox) go about selling the film? A big appeal, and one that most (if not all films) use are stars. Big stars. Despite some disagreement between Ross Grayson Bell and Art Linson, the latter was more favourable to casting Brad Pitt in the role of Tyler Durden [fig.4] (O'Hara, 2009). He eventually was, as the producers were "hoping for a nice star-led box-office hit". Edward Norton shortly followed as the Narrator [fig.3], and although the initial reasoning for these castings may have been to entice audiences, they comfortably fit their respective characters of the source material.

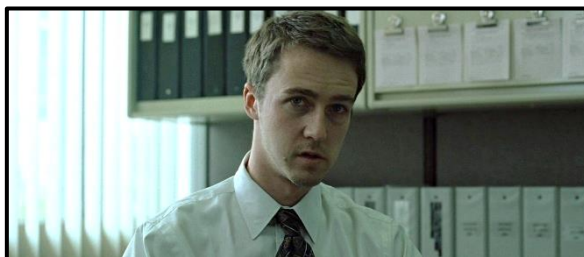


Figure 3. Edward Norton as Narrator (*Fight Club*, 1999)



Figure 4. Brad Pitt as Tyler Durden (*Fight Club*, 1999)

The very beginning of *Fight Club* (1999) features a highly-stylised CGI rollercoaster ride through the brain of our protagonist [fig.5]. The interesting part, is that it doesn't appear in the book, yet there are at least two reasons for its existence. The first being is that by using the visual canvas of film, Fincher takes us on a ride - dodging the synapses and stems of a brain in distress. It's a visual treat that shows us just how inside the head of our protagonist we'll be. In the book, this is a given, considering the story is told from a first-person perspective. But this is the film's way of showing that fact. It could also be argued that as well as the previously mentioned justification for this stylised introduction, that it's becoming a motif of Fincher, due to its inclusion in his previous film *Seven* (1995) and many of his future films [fig.6].



Figure 5. Title Sequence: *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999)



Figure 6. Title Sequence: *Seven* (Fincher, 1995)

One of the differences between the novel and the adapted film is how the Narrator meets Tyler Durden. The novel sees the Narrator travel to a nude beach during one of his business trips. There he sees Tyler for the first time:

Tyler was naked and sweating, gritty with sand, his hair wet and stringy, hanging in his face. (**Fight Club**, pg.32)

The description of Tyler in this part of the novel is quite suggestive, perhaps hinting at the Narrator having an attraction towards him. Or perhaps Tyler's nakedness is referring to him being born right then, exactly how all humans are brought into the world: naked. But besides from that, this entire scene has a kind of dream-like feel to it. Tyler is pulling driftwood from the sea and placing them in the sand in order to cast a shadow – a shadow that resembles a giant hand:

The giant shadow hand was perfect for one minute, and for one perfect minute Tyler has sat in the palm of a perfection he had created himself. (**Fight Club**, pg.33)

The Narrator states that after that perfect minute, the shadow hand becomes disfigured, resembling the hand of Nosferatu. It's a fitting metaphor for the Narrator sitting comfortably within the palm of his perfect creation, Tyler. He sits within his creation for too long and it starts to resemble something much more sinister. But Fincher brings something different to the screen. It's apparent that aesthetically speaking, this scene wouldn't fit in. The image of Tyler on a beach, naked, would suggest he was something of a mirage, and would add to the theory that Tyler doesn't exist, something Fincher would want hidden from the audience. Instead, the Narrator meets Tyler on an airplane, and both exchange a short conversation. The Narrator here is instead seduced by Tyler's intellect and far-from-mundane attitude [fig.7].



Figure 7. The Narrator meets Tyler (*Fight Club*, 1999)



Figure 8. Identical Briefcase (*Fight Club*, 1999)

While much of the scene in the novel doesn't involve direct dialogue, more show than tell, here Fincher uses Tyler's opening dialogue to demonstrate his character and beliefs:

I make, and I sell soap. The yardstick of civilization. Did you know that if you mix equal parts of gasoline and frozen orange juice concentrate you can make napalm? **Tyler Durden** (**Fight Club**, 1999).

From this alone we can see that Tyler is opposed to consumerism by making and selling his own soap. He calls it the 'yardstick of civilisation', but perhaps this is in a sarcastic manner, due how he renders the soap from actual human fat. And then continues to state how a few household items can be used for a bomb, again foreshadowing his desire for anarchy that comes later in the film.

Although most of this dialogue is picked from the Jim Uhl's script, Fincher has concentrated it down in order to get across the character of Tyler Durden in a respectable time but with maximum impact – an essential format for when adapting a book to film. But there is a hint at the twist near the end of the narrative, as the Narrator discovers that him and Tyler have the exact same briefcase **[fig.8]**. It's subtle enough, however, to disguise itself as simply the Narrator finding common ground with Tyler.

This scene in particular is a good example of why certain changes from the source material need to be made, in order to better fit the medium of film.



CONCLUSION:

Once filming had wrapped, *Fight Club* (1999) premiered at the Venice Film Festival, splitting critical opinion of the film straight down the middle. O'Hara (2009) continues to state that one half thought the film was "puerile, ultra-violent and fascist" and the other thought it was "satirical of immaturity, fascism and violence". You can see why the former party of critics could have viewed *Fight Club* that way, if you consider that perhaps they hadn't read the source material and didn't understand the message the first time round. Apparently, most audiences felt the same way. *Fight Club* only made \$37m in the US, while international returns were \$100m. Perhaps foreign audiences were more adept to that kind of cinema.

Lamble (2014) writes that once the initial shock of *Fight Club* began to subside, positive word of mouth about the film began to spread, leading to soaring DVD sales. Peter Travers (1999) in a review for the Rolling Stone called it "An uncompromising American classic". Pulver (2004) praises Fincher, stating that he not only "reflected a new mood in American political life", but "embraced new film-making technology" enabling advances in "cinematic form and style". It's clear that once *Fight Club*'s legacy had been formed, and audiences owe praise to both Fincher and Palahniuk, for if that adaptation hadn't been so close to the novels release, maybe it wouldn't have resonated as soundly.



Figure 9. TGWTD – Title Sequence (Fincher, 2011)



Figure 10. Mr Robot (Esmail, 2015-TBA)

The style and aesthetic that Fincher brought to *Fight Club* has still survived in his filmography, over 10 years later, as he adapted Steg Larsson's highly acclaimed novel *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Despite a recent Swedish adaptation by Niels Arden Oplev, Fincher sought to bring his own style and aesthetic to the story, and much like *Fight Club* he included the use of his infamous title sequence. Fincher contacted Tim Miller (co-founder of Blur) in order to develop a CGI title sequence [fig.9] to set the tone for his adaption (Watercutter, 2012). In regard to other works inspired by *Fight Club*, it's safe to assume that *Mr Robot* [fig.10], Sam Esmail's critically acclaimed TV series, owes some of its plot and structure to *Fight Club*. Its protagonist suffers from a similar mental condition and joins a group of vigilante hackers in an uprising against an evil corporation, in order to wipe out of the populations debt. But it brings enough of its own originality and style to rise it high above any kind of

copy-cat criticism. In fact, as Louisa Mellor (2015) puts it, *Mr Robot* is the spiritual successor to *Fight Club*:

Fight Club only had global consumerism and emasculation to rail against. Imagine Palahniuk's invective now, after Facebook, the 2008 financial crisis, PRISM.... If society had stripped away authentic experience to the extent that men arbitrarily pummeling each other was the only route back to individual freedom, what would Tyler Durden prescribe for a generation who spend their days stroking cartoon candy on tiny screens and communicating via the nuance of a thumbs up and down icons? **(Mellor, 2015).**

You could call *Mr Robot* an adaptation. It would seem like a fair statement. But it's an adaptation that's warranted, because it changes enough of the source material in order to better resonate with audiences today. And maybe one day, *Mr Robot* will be adapted into something different too. But the sources will always exist, untouched and living, in all their former glory.

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2022

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