

What causes alienation under Capitalism?

An exploration of the Capitalist desire in Fight Club and The Social Network through Marxist ideas.

This piece delves into the exploration of the capitalistic desire. Present in both of the films *Fight Club*, and *The Social Network*. It is based around Karl Marx's Alienation theory, a theory that looks at what exactly causes disdain for the capitalistic society among common workers. *Fight Club*, and *The Social Network* serve as two infinitely contrasting pieces, that ultimately arrive to the same end point, through alternative means. This piece of writing has looked to both expose and sympathise with the viewpoints presented, within these two films. As both choose to depict the outcasts of a Capitalistic society. Though seemingly fair, to those who choose to avoid confrontation, the system of Capitalism, is an inherently unfair, unequal, and unequivocally biased system. A system that I have chosen to shine a light on, for all of its faults and disadvantages. Those filmic examples, only serving as further reminders, and examples, of the extent to how the system can be exploitative.

David Fincher is a director that has become synonymous with paving the way for the modern crime thriller. His original classics, "*Se7en*" (*Se7en*, 1995) and "*Panic Room*" (*Panic Room*, 2002). As well

as his modern classics, “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo” (The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo, 2011) and “Gone Girl” (Gone Girl, 2014) have all grown to be landmarks within the genre. Exploring themes ranging from domestic abuse to the exact sins of humanity. However, there are a set of 4 films from David, that all seemingly coincide to create a consistent opinion on the topic of capitalism, which leads nicely further, into the idea of consumerism. These four films are “Fight Club” (Fight Club, 1999), “The Social Network” (The Social Network, 2010), “The Game” (The Game, 1997), and “The Killer” (The Killer, 2023). The connecting thread for these pieces is their each very contrasting explorations of capitalism, and the effects of heavy consumerism on the general populace, as a result of said capitalistic structure. “The Game” looks at how absurd consumerism can be for those privileged with seemingly infinite wealth, as it plays into a surrealist playground for the wealthy. “The Killer”, explores consumerism in a similar vein, yet twists the narrative to show how the profession of killing has become more of a tech enforced industry, rather than a skill based one. They both seem to have their very clear similarities to each other, in both how they’re criticising capitalism, but also how they actually go about exploring their own points, in a quite absurdist nature. What I want to focus on in particular, are the contrasting beliefs of “Fight Club”, and “The Social Network”. As their individual thesis go much deeper than their consumeristic forefronts.

As I have described, the idea that Fincher puts forward, in this selection of four films, is one of an opposing nature. It directly appears to depict the negative fallout of such a demanding societal structure. It falls almost entirely in line with a theory put forward by Karl Marx in fact. In The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Marx tells of the depths to the sheer amount of alienation, that can be caused by the desires, birthed by capitalistic pressures. Being an economic structure that is built into a pyramid formation, those at the top having built upon those at the bottom, who are forced to remain as the foundation, from fear of the entire structure toppling over. Those who aren’t contributing to the pyramid, are cast out of the machine, lacking the benefits that even those at the foundational stage are receiving. Marx’s ideas inherently sympathise with those struggling at the foundation. He becomes empathetic to their lack of power, lack of self-fulfilment, and lack of self-identity. Because the product that is created through labour, is private property to those providing a wage for workers. That product is, as a result, a big contribution to the worker feeling alienated towards what they do. They aren’t working towards their own passion, they aren’t improving their skills, or working towards an end point. They are simply a cog within a machine, that is easily replaced and manipulated. By providing labour, that doesn’t challenge or provide progress to oneself, there is this disconnect between the labourer and worker. Potentially leading to alienation, or, as a more extreme reaction, resentment. Under Capitalism, workers are expected to provide labour and, in the case of goods, are expected to make more than their wage determines, being a set number to how their value as a worker is deemed. If the labourer were to exceed that amount, they don’t get rewarded, but simply flood up the market with more of that good, lessening the value as a result. Marx explains how men become valued as goods,

“The demand for men necessarily governs the production of men, as of every other commodity. Should supply greatly exceed demand, a section of the workers sinks into beggary or starvation. The worker’s existence is thus brought under the same condition as the existence of every other commodity.” (Marx, 1932)

Man must now sell himself like a common good, his value based on how much income he can generate, for the capitalist looking to buy. In that regard, it is quite clear to see how many would have been thrown to the sideline by the capitalistic machine. For those who lack the means to provide labour, it means a lack of generated personal income. Thus, they will be required to indebt themselves to the state. And, by association, the capitalists who refuse to give them labour. For those who have sold themselves, it is then difficult to provide themselves, onto passion or work that they see fit to explore themselves. And for those who cannot become a part of the machine, because of their inherent association with the capitalist, they are the immediate target for suffering. Capitalism is a deadly cycle for the working class, as the want for a larger income, and larger livelihood, causes the worker to

provide more of their own life towards the capitalist. Sacrificing their own lifespan for the benefit of other workers, who will have a labour opportunity the minute other workers die off from exploitation.

It is no surprise that most of the world has equally adopted the structure of capitalism. Given how it benefits the governmental ecosystems the most, it is no wonder that the people in charge would allow a system that benefits them the most. If we were to look at America, the country that David Fincher examines the most. We can see that there is no escape from the grasps the system has on the people. Capitalism, the minute it began to edge the line on infringement of basic human rights, was the minute it became so much more than just an economical system. As Rund Abdelfatah and Ramtin Arablouei write:

Capitalism is an economic system, but it's also so much more than that. It's become a sort of ideology, this all-encompassing force that rules over our lives and our minds. It might seem like it's an inevitable force, but really, it's a construction project that took hundreds of years and no part of it is natural or just left to chance. (Abdelfatah and Arablouei, 2021)

In American politics, despite Republicans and Democrats both representing the Left and Right respectively, they hold the commonality of believing in the very concept of Capitalism. So, under the banner of America, "the land of the free". There are inherent disadvantages, depending on your class, and social status. The very concept of "The American Dream", is inherently classist.

"The American Dream" has always been about the prospect of success, but 100 years ago, the phrase meant the opposite of what it does now. The original "American Dream" was not a dream of individual wealth; it was a dream of equality, justice and democracy for the nation. (Diamond, 2018)

And so, we see how even when the term first reached its inception, the phrase "The American Dream" was forever blanketed, with a layer of inherent inequality. Even today, decades after the term had become warped in meaning, the phrase that was based in a measurement of success, is unfair to a whole section of the class system. For those who are left to the bottom of the capitalist's ladder, "The American Dream" serves as nothing more than a "carrot on a stick". A motivation for a reality that will likely never come true. For those at the bottom of the pyramid. The labourers. They are motivated to work harder, for the idea of a raise in wages, for the idea of a house with white picket fences, and for the idea of the perfect nuclear family. However, the reality of it is, that from the greed and unbalance of Capitalism, many of those labourers will simply never see the dream fulfilled. And will have been exploited for means outside of their control, the laborer realising the extent to said exploitation, only when it has become too late to change.

Fight Club

Released widely on October the 12th 1999, on the cusp of Y2K. Fight Club was received with a complete mixed reaction. Financially, it made absolutely no money. And critically, it seemingly came across even worse. It follows a character we only know as "The Narrator", as he is slowly pulled into Tyler Durden's world, a drifter he meets on a plane. Durden's world one of constant anti-consumer rhetoric, and masculine infused violence. The two begin a "Fight Club" and gather a group that slowly morphs into one of pure rage and delinquency. It is no secret that Fight Club is a very anti-capitalist film. From the very beginning, we are introduced into a murkily coloured world, devoid of any positively associated colour. The Narrator, a labourer worn down by the endless cycle of labour he's given over towards his leaders. He begins to spiral into anarchy, as the personification of his self, Tyler Durden, introduces him into an alternate way of thinking. It is vital that we understand Tyler Durden's role in the story, as he is the core connecting thread towards a form of Marxism, separate to their clear anarchist tendencies.

The Narrator becomes alienated towards the very idea of his simple life, "With insomnia, nothing's real, everything's far away. Everything's a copy, of a copy, of a copy" (Fight Club, 1999) We then get a flash of Tyler Durden for a split second of a frame. It is at this point that we begin to see his alienation take shape and form, into a personality opposed to the very idea of The Narrator's

existence. The Narrator becomes comfortable with the idea of identifying with brands and labels, rather than himself or his own passions. He also begins to lack the motivation to even express his frustration with his environment, as his only source of expression, his therapy group, has become just another portion of the daily cycle of his life. As he begins to find a fleeting source of dopamine, in forging a story in every kind of therapy group. It all becomes an act of escapism for The Narrator. A brief and fragile way of fighting against his environment. The narrator begins to form the basis of Marxist theories for us to see. He becomes almost a poster child for the audience to identify with, most of whom are in the same situation, as there is no escape from Capitalism. It leads on to the most important moment in The Narrator's life, when on one fateful business trip, he meets Tyler Durden.

In a quite Jungian fashion. Tyler Durden is the personification of The Narrator's desires. Tyler is a vagabond, soap salesman. He can allow himself the freedom to travel outside of the system, free from materialistic desires, free from capitalistic desires, made only stronger from the wage race. Tyler forces The Narrator to confront his true self so to speak, a point even further empathised within The Narrator, when he returns to discover his home, filled with materialistic goods, having been destroyed within an all-encompassing flame. The Narrator comes to realise that having lost his designer furniture, his branded condiments, food, and metaphorical materialist desires, that it was all for nothing. It is at this point, that The Narrator then begins to entirely embrace Tyler Durden, his "true self". From here on, it is rather simple to refer to The Narrator and Tyler Durden as one in the same, as their ideology begin to synergise, into a resulting anarchistic rebellion.

Tyler Durden, and The Narrator both exhibit clear evidence, of Marx's alienation theory. Beyond spouting endless Marxist rhetoric, Fight Club is ultimately about the misuse of traditional masculinity. It is an exposé. it was reviewed as a gloriously original work, exposing what is at the heart of our modern hate and discontent, and pitched as one man's search for misplaced masculinity in a white-collar world. Tyler Durden's manifestation in The Narrator's mind, is a direct parallel to the call to action by Marx, and the Communist ideal. Project Mayhem, which is what the Fight Club eventually evolves into. Is a movement sought to devolve society and the way that it is structured, in favour of chaos. Hence where Tyler's clear association with the state of anarchy comes from. It directly links with the Communist mission statement which states

"[Communists] declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win." (Marx and Engels, 1848)

It is forever how Fight Club exhumes that masculine infused DNA, that ultimately brings to the forefront, its further subtext. Beyond the very plainly put Marxist ideals, is a story that invokes a warning, to those who misplace their anger. The "Fight Club", a place for blue collar workers to come and vent out their frustration by way of physical altercation, becomes just as much a place of ideals to fester. A place where the ideals generate from unstable, and insecure masculine figures.

Fight Club begins with the narrator proclaiming: "That old saying, how you always hurt the one you love – well, it works both ways". The importance of this line, only becoming vital once you see the whole picture. Tyler Durden and The Narrator are one in the same. The Narrator's ideals, Tyler Durden, ultimately hurt his true self. That true self, being a far cry from what you'd stereotypically assume to be, masculine. Or what society itself would see as a "masculine figure". In order to keep up with the preexisting expectations set on him, through social norms, capitalistic desires, and how he personally sees himself. He must adapt, but that adaption ultimately takes the form of violence. In the end, Fight Club is a warning. A warning of how positive ideals can fester into something of a much more violent, and anti-social origin.

The Social Network

The Social Network is a dramatized account, depicting the rise to fame of Mark Zuckerberg. Creator of the real social network, Facebook. The Social Network is a narrative almost directly contrasted by

Fight Club. And, for the purposes of this exploration into the capitalistic dream, caps off a nicely themed duology. Where Fight Club looks to explore the bottom of the capitalistic pyramid. The Social Network looks to examine the tip of that pyramid, and the exact effort it takes to climb such a steep ladder. Being a biopic with real world ties, The Social Network is a vital piece to understand the role of the capitalist within the system.

Within film, each piece is designed with a tagline in mind. This can be used as a short piece of wording that encompasses the idea, or general meaning and point of an individual film or script. In The Social Network's case, the tagline is "You don't get to 500 million friends without making a few enemies". This tagline perfectly summarises the idea, that The Social Network can be used to prove every single one of Marx's points in how harsh the machine of Capitalism can be towards the individual. The Social Network, as I briefly explained. Is the semi biopical story of how Mark Zuckerberg brought Facebook, into the public limelight. Throughout the film, we see how Mark's anti-social nature, leads him to exhibiting each sign of a capitalist, in all their self-centred, exploitative nature. In the very first sequence of scenes of The Social Network. We are introduced to Mark Zuckerberg, as he is on a date with the film's fictionalised character Erica Albright. Here, we are allowed to examine how much of a self-centred character Mark truly is, as his cold and calculated approach to conversation, leads him to talking down to Erica, in a tone that allows the audience to assume about the depths to Mark's superiority complex. Mark knows that his own intellect will allow him to excel within society, to climb the ladder faster than most people. However, he has the mind of a capitalist, while still being a labourer. Meaning that, simply by association, he is alienating the people around him, as they fail to relate to his delusions of grandeur.

The choice to portray Mark in this way, is most certainly a calculated choice on behalf of both David Fincher, and the screenwriter Aaron Sorkin. According to Marx,

Production does not simply produce man as a commodity, the human commodity, man in the role of commodity; it produces him in keeping with this role as a mentally and physically dehumanized being. – Immorality, deformity, and dulling of the workers and the capitalists. (Marx, 1932)

Capitalism produces labourers who, most often feel dehumanized, and unvalued for their personal benefits, and more for their ability to provide the capitalist with more capital. If we were to look at Mark Zuckerberg, as a representative of the Capitalist, which he would later become, when Facebook gained millions of users. Then it begins to make sense how the creators have consciously decided to portray him, as a character. The minute that Mark's character can, he is handing out contracts, and legally binding documents that forgo his companions from continuing work on Facebook, to a point where he is left on his lonesome, atop the mountains of revenue he has obtained from his venture. He is a figure that is able to dispose of labourers on his level, without any remorse. His best friend Eduardo Saverin gets his shares, and capital within Facebook diluted by the Capitalist, Mark. As a result, Eduardo becomes alienated to the very idea of his friend being someone he can trust. As Mark has made the full transformation to Capitalist, using that desire to fuel his personal satisfaction, and ego. Mark had achieved what we now know as "The American Dream", but at the cost of all of his personal relationships, and moral compass. In order to achieve said American Dream, Mark has had to forgo his own humanity. Becoming just another exploitative Capitalist sitting comfortably at the top of the ladder.

It is now quite clear to understand, just how important Marxist theories on capitalism are. Particularly in relation to how intricate the characterisations within Fight Club and The Social Network are. For how all-encompassing the eye of capitalism is. It is no wonder that, through lived experiences, people have looked for ways to express their frustrations with the system. And, ultimately, I believe that both Fight Club and the Social Network act as excellent examples of the reach that individual ideals can have. With Fight Club gaining a huge cult audience, and slowly but surely becoming David Fincher's most celebrated film. Even after its overwhelmingly negative reception in 1999. While The Social Network, like many of Aaron Sorkin's scripts, has gone on to be described as a film with one of the best scripts ever produced. Roger Ebert describing it as "cocksure, impatient, cold, exciting and

instinctively perspective” (Ebert, 2010) What is important to conclude on however, is the emphasised contrast between Fight Club and The Social Network. Through the eye of Marxist theories on the capitalistic structure, Tyler Durden and Mark Zuckerberg took drastically different paths to “beat that system”. Where Mark Zuckerberg identified the key to advancing within the structure, he then began to apply his cold, anti-social nature, to bluntly betray and advance up the ladder, on the backs of other workers and friends alike. He exhibits and encompasses the exact role that the capitalist has within the system. To exploit and harness labourer’s labour, in favour of a higher social status, and higher wealth. On the opposite side, The Narrator, and Tyler Durden of Fight Club are ostracised from society. Or, as Marx would put it, alienated from the system in place. The Narrator becomes tired of the endless grind of the capitalist life, from the point of view from the very bottom of the ladder. He becomes obsessed with escaping from that life, by way of brief escapism, in various support groups for terminal illnesses. However, as I just mentioned, these are fleeting pieces of escapism, and that leads The Narrator to form the ultimate form of escapism, in Tyler Durden. An anarchistic, masculine, role model for The Narrator to give the wheel to, as Tyler goes on to form “Fight Club”, and then, “Project Mayhem”. Project Mayhem being a direct manifesto like answer to the capitalistic system that Tyler and The Narrator have come to have a distain for, in a very similar vein to the call to action by the Communist party. Project Mayhem becomes an ideological group, all of its own against the machine of capitalism. Where, in reality, it would seem apt to describe Tyler Durden as a cold cut criminal, and Mark Zuckerberg as a horrendously antagonistic, and exploitative personality. In looking at it through the theory of alienation from Marx, the reality of it is, that Mark and Tyler are both victims. Victims of the capitalist system, which has forced each to survive by whatever means they can find. Whether that be by aligning themselves with Anarchy, in the name of supposed change. Or by taking a “every man for themselves” attitude, in the pursuit of personal game. In a system that has almost forced people to take that role. It is clear that both labourers not only support Marx’s theories. But also serve as a cautionary tale. Of how the capitalistic system has the power to make men into monsters.

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