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The Phantasm of Revolution from *Fight Club* to *Mr. Robot*

ABSTRACT

In the following paper we explore the utopian theme of revolution in two filmic works of art: the movie *Fight Club* (1999), directed by David Fincher, and the very recent TV series *Mr. Robot* (2015), created by Sam Esmail. We will argue that *Fight Club* is an existential meditation on simulation, dehumanization and the capitalistic tyranny of the objects combined with a nihilistic pursuit of authenticity through violence. Closely following *Fight Club*'s rumination on madness as "revolution of the self," *Mr. Robot* allows us to take a peek into the mystery of revolutionary freedom: will it change everything or will we come to regret our former tyrants?

KEYWORDS

Authenticity; Nihilism; Existentialism; Film Studies; Revolution; Freedom; Destruction; Anarchy; Psychosis.

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Fight Club: From Simulation to Project Mayhem

The cult movie *Fight Club* (1999) combines central themes from the existentialist tradition with a postmodern critique of consumerism and a nihilistic perspective (from Schopenhauer to Cioran). Based on the novel written by Chuck Palahniuk (1996), David Fincher's movie tells the story of an insomniac office worker (Jack, played by Edward Norton) who crosses paths with a nihilistic soap maker (Brad Pitt as Tyler Durden). They both form an underground fight club that becomes the first step in a revolutionary project targeted at the destruction of society.

The postmodern motif of the copy ("Narrator: With insomnia, nothing's real. Everything's far away. Everything's a copy of a copy of a copy"¹) is essential. In a society ruled by the Heideggerian "They Self" (*das Man*), we are, as psychosociological subjects, one another's copies. In Heidegger's version, "the Others... are ... those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself."² Such being the case, we are identical not only in our pursuit of similar objects, we are also alike in the inherent structures of subjectivity. Society seems to provide the common



measure for each individual and the result is a dehumanization of the *Dasein*. This is why Robert Bennett remarks that *Fight Club* calls for a *rehumanization* of the subject through the existential exploitation of death, suffering and violence.³ Are we still human? We certainly keep the appearance of the human structures but we might be only a reflection of the things we own (“Tyler Durden: The things you own end up owning you.”⁴) or an echo of the repetitive cycle work-media-sleep.

In Chuck Palahniuk’s novel, the critique of consumerism is made from an anarcho-nihilistic perspective:

And I wasn’t the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue.

We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern...

We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper...

You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you’re satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you’ve got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug.

Then you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you.⁵

The “obscure object of desire” (to paraphrase Buñuel) has moved from the erotic sphere to the economic one, following the phases of a libidinal economy. Just as lust can become gluttony, it can also turn into

avarice. The *possessive* and individually *dispossessive* objects are not perceived by

the majority of the consumers as an alienating factor: on the contrary, the objects are seen as the means of displaying personal success. We should remember Tyler Durden’s words: “Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don’t need”⁶ (double dissatisfaction: destructive work + contingent possessions).

The society of simulation, one in which we have become the copies of the others, in which we imitate and mimic existence, is balanced in *Fight Club* by the pursuit of authenticity. The quest for authenticity is coupled with a project of cultural destruction (just like in Nietzsche’s oscillation between nihilism and anti-nihilism, the eventual intentionality of destruction is recreation and rehumanization), which stems from the postulates of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche or Bakunin. This declaration of active nihilism is called *Project Mayhem*: “It’s Project Mayhem that’s going to save the world. A cultural ice age. A prematurely induced dark age. Project Mayhem will force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for the Earth to recover.”⁷ As Barry Vacker argues: “To blow up the world requires an older form of consciousness, a consciousness destined to be emptied of scientific and technological knowledge, the intellectual devolution from modern to premodern.”⁸

The utopic project of assassinating modernity in order to create a premodern age fit for hunters and gatherers is highlighted in the novel in poetic post-apocalyptic fragments:

You’ll hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center, and dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle



leaning at a fortyfivedegree angle. We'll paint the skyscrapers with huge totem faces and goblin tikis, and every evening what's left of mankind will retreat to empty zoos and lock itself in cages as protection against bears and big cats and wolves that pace and watch us from outside the cage bars at night.⁹

The civilizing symbols (Rockefeller Center, a complex of 19 commercial buildings from New York covering 22 acres and the Space Needle Tower from Seattle, 184 m high), touristic attractions and emblems of the capital, become, in a premodern projection, hunting terrains. The urban guerilla becomes fighting for survival, where we must prove once again our spiritual and especially our physical superiority over animals, while zoos become cages of protection for the human beings.

Fight Club's emphasis on the body (our consciousness is embodied) and on fight (the body is not only a temple; it is also a tank) is a plea for immediacy, which proves that the exploitation of pain and death brings us in our true center, defending the idea that we can overcome alienation through authenticity. If simulation brings along with it conformism, authenticity is synonymous with originality: we have the exact ratio between depersonalization and individualism. Palahniuk (and maybe also Fincher) believes that after postmodernity a sort of premodernity will be resurrected. Is it a sort of postexistential utopia to believe that after late modernity a sort of *alternative modernity* may be possible, a modernity which goes beyond capital and is in need of an authentic individual, who awakens from the "dogmatic sleep" of alienating work (who works for his own development and not for money) and overcomes the Pascalian diversion of the media through existential focus and recreation of the self? There is an

inherent need of the *Dasein* to turn himself or herself into a work of art, to resist the vile dictatorship of the objects.

Mr. Robot: Revolution at the Gates

Mr. Robot (2015), the psychological thriller TV series created by Sam Esmail, combining somehow *The Matrix* with *Fight Club*, tells the story of a computer programmer who is also a vigilante hacker. Elliot Anderson (played by the inspired Rami Malek) is a security engineer for the cybersecurity firm Allsafe. Plagued by clinical depression and anxiety disorder, dealing also with a morphine addiction, Elliot is recruited by the charismatic anarchist Mr. Robot (Christian Slater) to take down the great corporation E(vil) Corp (Allsafe's greatest client) and to totally cancel all debts.

In a plot that is often reminiscent of *Fight Club*, Elliot's purpose is to reset the economic clock to *the anarchistic zero hour*, to recreate the postulate of equal chances which is the cornerstone of any democracy. "Our democracy has been hacked" (a quote from Al Gore) is one of the key lines of the TV series. Moreover, "equality," one of the principles of the French Revolution, is today – simply put – a lie. "There's no middle anymore. Just rich and poor,"¹⁰ claims Darlene, one of the hackers of society (the group that recruits Elliot). The mediatic sleep intends to make us forget that we live in a modern plutocracy, where *to exist* is synonymous with *to pay*, where *money* has a high ontological status.

As I have mentioned, what is impressive in *Mr. Robot* is its capacity to provide a serious reply to the nihilistic and existential *Fight Club*. What happens to Tyler Durden, Project Mayhem, revolution in the age of Facebook, terrorism, migrationism and "total"



camera surveillance? Tyler, like Neo from *Matrix*, must become a hacker. It is interesting that both the movie *Fight Club* and *Mr. Robot*'s episode 9 touch climax with the accomplishment of revolution. The bank buildings explode in the famous final *Fight Club* scene, accompanied by the indie rock track *Where Is My Mind* by the Pixies, and as Elliot explains to Tyrell (one of his archenemies) how he destroyed E Corp, we hear Maxen Cyrin's brilliant piano cover to "Where Is My Mind":

Tyrell Wellick: How long has this been going on?

Elliot Alderson: I don't know.

Tyrell Wellick: And what is it that you're doing exactly?

Elliot Alderson: Encrypting all the files, all the Evil Corp's financial records will be impossible to access. The encryption key will self-delete after the process completes.

Tyrell Wellick: What about the backups?

Elliot Alderson: I took care of that too. China...

Tyrell Wellick: Steel Mountain? Of course, even when we went redundant.

Elliot Alderson: I hacked the AirDream network. I was in all of them.

Tyrell Wellick: You really thought of everything.

[pauses]

Tyrell Wellick: Who else was involved?

Elliot Alderson: Just me.¹¹

Like Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, Sam Esmail's *Mr. Robot* allows us to take a peek into *the end of everything*, answering the primary question: what happens after the victory of revolution? Is absolute freedom possible or – to paraphrase Emil Cioran – will we miss our tyrants? There are three answers to this crucial question and the first one belongs to one of E Corp's executive

vice presidents, James Plouffe, who speaks the truth for the first time in his life and kills himself live (in a scene reminiscent of *The Network*), after his persona was shattered:

James Plouffe: You want me to be honest?

Reporter: Of course.

James: You're right, absolutely right. The public should be worried. I mean, personally, my life is over. My pension, savings, everything has been in this company since I started here and that's all gone now. Truth is, I've been with the engineering team all week and no one knows how to fix it. In fact, about the only thing they do know for certain is that this will be impossible to fix.¹²

Some of the tyrants (or plutocrats) will be destroyed by the advent of revolution and this is the first answer. They who believe that the poor are "nobodies," that the life of the ordinary citizens amounts to zero will be reduced to zero as well, to the economic and ontological class of non-existence. The formula of this class is the following one: if you were penniless or broke, you might as well be dead (or, to put it more simply: *if you have nothing, you are nothing.*) This is why Mr. Plouffe killed himself – because he had lived inside this closed circuit of ontological capitalism which claims that existence and wealth are equivalent. We should quote Tyrell Wellick to understand this equality between *being* and *financial success* and the patronizing contempt of the master regarding his slaves.

Tyrell Wellick: I've seen our waiter here for the last seven years. Must be in his 50s. Maybe has kids ... I wonder, what must he think of himself. His life's potential reached a 30 grand a



year salary, an economy car he still owes money on, two bedroom apartment, child support, coupons. I couldn't bear it. A life like that. A life of an ordinary cockroach whose biggest value is to serve me salad.¹³

For the plutocrats, we – as ordinary citizens – are mere “cockroaches.” Seen from their perspective, “equality,” “justice,” “freedom” and “God” are nothing but hollow words deprived of essence. The only truth is the 100\$ bill, the rest is just, for instance, the delusion of equality – ridiculous for the master, necessary for the slave. It is almost Kafkaian that we, as ordinary “poor” struggling people, seem to be identified with cockroaches. But this personification is fitting for a society that has no middle ground, as the anarchist Darlene infers. Let us move to a second answer to the problem of revolution. We have seen that some of the oligarchs have been squashed just like the bugs they look down upon in a world built upon on an economic ontology.

Angela: Everyone else is worried, but you? You're sure that you're gonna get through this. Why?

Philip Price: People did this. Right? I mean, aliens didn't invade our planet. Zeus didn't come out of the heavens to destroy us. Zombies haven't risen from the dead. No. Whoever's behind this, they're just people... like you and me. Except, of course, I have the full weight of the biggest conglomerate in the world behind me. You'll come to realize that when you have that, matters like this, they tend to crack... under that weight.¹⁴

From the speech of E Corp's CEO Philip Price, one can see that revolution

may be able to wipe out some of the tyrants, but in the long run the power structures will remain unaltered. It is a kind of stoical wisdom that advises against rebellion, that the hegemonic system will integrate its systemic anomaly, to remind one of the theses from *Matrix Reloaded*. Therefore, in the CEO's conclusion we have the same reference to an economic ontology: the biggest amount of money is equal to (quasi)-absolute power and to (real) existence.

The third answer to the revolutionary issue brings along a new take on reality. Closely following *Fight Club*, where Jack turns into Tyler Durden in order to initiate the revolution, Elliot has to identify with Mr. Robot to achieve his ambitious plan. One can say that both revolutionaries are psychotic and perhaps madness is a revolution of the self, a way of meeting the Jungian shadow, of becoming aware of our unconsciousness. Without the revolution of the self, no “real” objective revolution is possible: “How can I change the world if I even can't change myself?”¹⁵ We might say that changing ourselves and changing the world are comparable because *my* universe will change if I change my perspective (with the postscript that some philosophers like Seneca or Schopenhauer wonder whether it is really possible to change ourselves). So what is reality?

Eliot: You're not real. You're not real.

Mr. Robot: What? You are? Is any of it real? I mean, look at this. Look at it! A world built on fantasy. Synthetic emotions in the form of pills. Psychological warfare in the form of advertising.

Mind-altering chemicals in the form of... food! Brainwashing seminars in the form of media. Controlled isolated bubbles in the form of social networks. Real? You want to talk about reality?

We haven't lived in anything remotely close to it since the turn of the century.



We turned it off, took out the batteries, snacked on a bag of GMOs while we tossed the remnants in the ever-expanding Dumpster of the human condition. We live in branded houses trademarked by corporations built on bipolar numbers jumping up and down on digital displays, hypnotizing us into the biggest slumber mankind has ever seen. You have to dig pretty deep, kiddo, before you can find anything real. We live in a kingdom of bullshit. A kingdom you've lived in for far too long. So don't tell me about not being real. I'm no less real than the fucking beef patty in your Big Mac.

Mr. Robot's brilliant speech, taking place in New York's Times Square, perhaps the most "hyperreal" (Baudrillard) place on the planet, among noisy protesters and extremely invasive commercials (the revolution has taken place but advertising ironically lives on: someone also has to advertise the revolution), with sounds of helicopters surveying the scene, is centered on this idea: "We haven't lived in anything remotely close to [reality] since the turn of the century." There is a misunderstanding between the two meanings of the word *reality*: Eliot, battling with his demons (anxiety, depression, psychosis), refers to a sort of psychological *reality*; Mr. Robot, clearly a sensation type in the Jungian sense (a sort of extreme realist), describes a sociological *reality*. But what is real from a philosophical perspective?

Even if one calls it "hyperreal," "post-real" or "para-real," reality seems to have absorbed its antithesis, unreality. We live in a "world built on fantasy," a world where life has become a dream. A sure sign of madness is that one cannot discern between fantasy and reality. In a world that cannot discern between those two, in a psychotic universe, isn't it a sign of normalcy to

become mad? Perhaps we can say that in both *Mr. Robot* and *Fight Club* becoming insane is a symptom of wisdom, a sign of (total) understanding, a way of accessing hyperlucidity: the ones who are considered normal must willingly join the cage of repression, forgetfulness, the most common lies and mostly sleep ("the biggest slumber mankind has ever seen"). We sleep while working, shopping, watching TV: the ones who wake up must be executed or incarcerated in asylums. So, let us ask once again: what is *reality*?

Logically speaking, reality = reality + unreality: a hegemonic metastatic disease that has the structure of a dream. Moreover, what is the final answer of revolution? Let us review the former three versions: (1) some of the tyrants are wiped out like cockroaches (the metaphor for the ordinary citizens); (2) other plutocrats believe that revolution changes nothing, the power structures remain the same; (3a) the revolution of the self is the real revolution; (3b) if *life is a dream*, then revolution is also a dream. Perhaps revolution is just a phantasm but in a world built on the logic of phantasy, it might be the only dream worth pursuing. To quote Albert Camus, "I rebel – therefore we exist."¹⁶

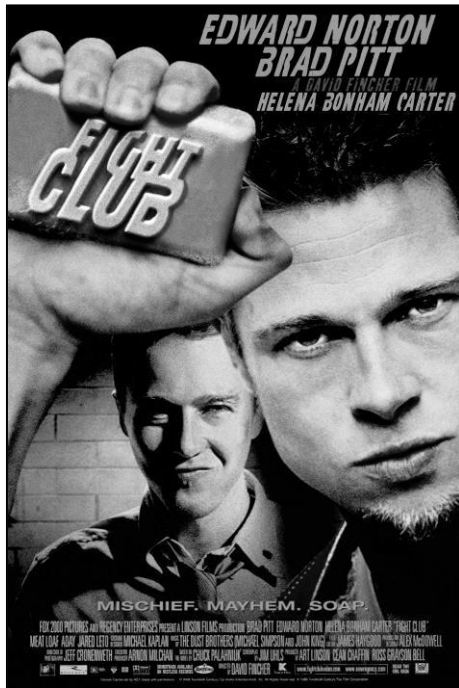
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- ⁵ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage Books, 2006, p. 43.
- ⁶ *Fight Club* (1999).
- ⁷ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 125.
- ⁸ Barry Vacker, *Slugging Nothing. Fighting the Future in Fight Club* [Kindle version], Theory Vortex Experiments, 2008, Locations 344-345.
- ⁹ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, p. 124.
- ¹⁰ *Mr. Robot* (2015), created by Sam Esmail, S01, E08.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*, E09.
- ¹² *Ibidem*, E10.
- ¹³ *Ibidem*, E05.
- ¹⁴ *Ibidem*, E10.
- ¹⁵ Faithless, "Salva Mea," *Reverence* (Audio CD), Swanyard Studios, London, 1996.
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Notes



Fight Club movie poster (1999) (left)
Mr. Robot TV series poster (2015) (right)