*Exordium: The idea of the Bad Seed, the idea that there is a demonic call, should startle our native intelligence, awakening it from the innocence of our American theories so that as a nation we can see that evil is attracted to, belongs with, innocence. Then we might finally recognize that in America, Natural Born Killers are the secret companions of, are even prompted by, Forrest Gumps – James Hillman*

The concept of the evil inherent in human nature is a theme that has been explored throughout the history of story-telling. It seems that modern society has become complacent and unresponsive regarding exhibitions of violence, being desensitized by the daily spectacle of brutality expressed through the media. Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club* and Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* are the attempts of these visionaries to incorporate and portray the premise of human evil in relation to modern society.

Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 novel, *Fight Club*, is an existential analysis of the condition of the modern-day man’s condition. The novel is told from the first-person perspective of an anonymous narrator (who later is referred to as “Jack”). Jack is an automotive insurance employee who is employed in field studies to determine liabilities in car crashes. The novel also drifts into the second-person perspective from time to time with the narrator actively engaging the reader. The first example of society’s desensitization towards the value of human life is presented with Jack’s assessment of his job:

If a new car built by my company leaves Chicago traveling west at 60 miles an hour, and the rear differential locks up, and the car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside, does my company initiate a recall? You take the population of vehicles in the field (A) and multiply it by the probate rate of failure (B), then multiply the result by the average cost of our out-of-court settlement (C). A times B times C equals X. This is what it will cost if we don’t initiate a recall. If X is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cares and no one gets hurt. If X is less than the cost of a recall, then we don’t recall (Palahniuk 30).

The narrator (from here-on referred to as Jack) even admits this chilling information to people he meets on airplane travels. Initially, Jack’s travel companions are understandably shocked at this revelation; but they soon shrug it off – which is a signifier of contemporary society’s tolerance for the macabre since this is “just how things are done.”

Jack is forced to endure a daily repetitive existence as a member of the working class. As a sufferer of insomnia, the dullness of his daily routine and his lack of fulfillment leads him to endure a constant waking life in which the world becomes distant and dreamlike. Jack’s doctor advises him to begin attending support groups at a local church in lieu of medication. The support groups, designed for people suffering from life-altering disabilities, provide Jack with an emotional release that relieves his insomnia. For a short period, attending support groups allows Jack to continue functioning as a normal human being in society. One day, Jack comes home to find his apartment and belongings destroyed in a bombing. Being immediately thrust into homelessness, Jack finds himself forced to share a dwelling with the character of Tyler Durden. The two men begin using violence as a means of releasing stress and attaining spiritual fulfillment. They start up a “fight club” in which other men who are sick of their meaningless existences may feel a sense of belonging and importance. The men who join the fight club are typically lower-class citizens seeking a means through which their lives may possess some significance.

During one of the fight club meetings, Tyler addresses the group of men and offers a commentary on their position in society,

Man, I see in fight club the strongest and smartest men who've ever lived. I see all this potential, and I see squandering. God damn it, an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables; slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War's a spiritual war... our Great Depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off (Palahniuk 76).

By appealing to the men’s sense of worthlessness in a society that gave them a raw deal, Tyler is able to become a cult leader for these warriors. Tyler Durden constantly preaches to his club about the restorative power of violence and the sanctity of knowing one’s physical limits. In *The Fiction of Self-destruction:Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralist*, Jesse Kavadlo notes that Tyler creates his own regime of immorality in response to corporate immorality. Kavadlo explains,

Tyler’s followers, the nameless and faceless Space Monkeys, blur the lines between rebellion and conformity with the zeal of conversion, discarding tie-wearing, Starbucks-sipping, and IKEA-shopping by becoming mantra-repeating black shirts…the book’s crypto-fascism…is a call to recognize that fascism is the endgame of a capitalist system that would reduce workers to drones and all personal identification to brand names and commercial transactions…The book’s political subtext insinuates that our cherished bastions of American liberty – the free market, liberal autonomy, and family values – come loaded with nascent totalitarianism (Kavadlo 13).

By creating an army of self-actualized men who obey his orders, Tyler is able to fight the system in which he otherwise would have no status. His followers often repeat that “in death we become heroes,” which means that they have no real identity in this new society either, but here they *choose* to exchange personal agency for the goal of a common cause. This common cause is realized in the urban terrorist projects labeled under the codename Project Mayhem. Like most cult leaders, Tyler believes himself to be more than human, someone that can achieve transcendence through the absolute defiance of every social stricture. Jack describes Tyler’s purpose in creating an anarchistic regime,

Tyler said the goal of Project Mayhem had nothing to do with other people. Tyler didn’t care if other people got hurt or not. The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world. (Palahniuk 122)

By using drastic measures of violence and terrorism, these men attempt to achieve an objective in which they could finally be winners. Destroying the current system would allow them a chance to start over and live the lives they had imagined. These men have rejected normal society in the same way as outlaw biker gangs. As noted by Hunter S. Thompson in his documentation of the Hells Angels, men of the lower class realize that society will never accept them; therefore they react like violent children and impose their own will whenever possible. In *Fight Club and the Dangers of the Oedipal Obsession*, Paul Kennett notes that Tyler’s men have been given the illusion of self-realization in order to persuade them to follow the bidding of their leader, Tyler Durden. Instead of possessing any true agency, the Space Monkeys are simply contributing to Tyler’s power by relinquishing their own. Kennett also implies a correlation between Tyler and the archetypical cult leader who is insatiable in terms of greed and power. Accordingly, Kennett explains,

Tyler takes license to impose his own master narrative on his followers and subsequently on an entire civilization. His megalomania reaches its apex as he seeks not only to dismantle history but to replace it with a new order where his actions place him squarely in the role of the God/Father (Kennett 56).

What is especially disturbing about the novel’s implications concerning human evil is seen when Jack finally understands that Tyler Durden is merely Jack’s alter-ego. Even after realizing all the horror and terrorism he has unconsciously caused, Jack still denies any connection to Tyler,

I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I’m not (Palahniuk 174).

In summation, Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* sends a very dangerous message about the possibilities for self-actualization through open violence. Yet, even in contermporary society where violence is passively accepted as a daily inevitability, this is a message that would most likely be advocated and embraced solely by the lower classes of society. However, Oliver Stone’s creation, *Natural Born Killers*, is a work that seems to implicate all of society for the evils inherent in human nature.

*Natural Born Killers* (1994) is a cinematic commentary concerning the evils inherent in modern society. Oliver Stone uses his film to acknowledge the systems of evil that are expressed in daily life. The evil portrayed in the film is focused on the immoral tendencies inherent in human nature. The story unfolds as two lovers named Mickey and Mallory Knox set out on a country-wide killing rampage, without any particular purpose or objective. As the malevolent couple rages across America, the media closely follows their exploits; the couple quickly gains international attention for their murderous deeds.

Mickey Knox is a deviant entity, one who seems to wholly embody the evil inherent in human nature. Whereas most human beings attempt to mitigate and avoid evil in their decisions, Mickey celebrates and exemplifies wickedness. In an interview with a top-rated TV journalist named Wayne Gale, Mickey describes the moment when he came to understand his reason for living,

But I came to the direction I need a gun…I walked into the place and had never seen so many guns in all my life…I asked to see a shotgun…As soon as I held that baby in my hands, I knew what I was gonna do. It felt so good. It felt like it was a part of me…I immediately bought it. Bought a bunch of boxes of ammo. Turned my car around, drove to Mallory's house, we took care of Mallory's parents, packed up the car, and we were off. Everybody thought I'd gone crazy. The cops, my mom, everybody. But you see, they all missed the point of the story. I wasn't crazy. But when I was holding the shotgun, it all became clear. I realized for the first time my one true calling in life. I'm a natural born killer.

Mickey’s quote exemplifies his malevolent character. He believes that evil and killing are natural part of life. In the same interview, Mickey admits that he has inherited his bad seed from his paternal ancestry. The cold detachment with which he discusses murder signifies the extent to which Mickey believes his own words. He believes that his reign of destruction was predetermined by fate; therefore he has no qualms in taking human life. Mickey’s psyche is typical of some mass-murderers and serial killers. He believes that his deeds of devastation are prompted by a higher calling. Thusly, Mickey believes he is something more than human. This is evidenced by another quote he exchanged in the TV interview with Wayne Gale,

WAYNE: So tell me. How can you look at an ordinary person, an innocent guy with kids, and then shoot him to death. I mean, how can you bring yourself to do that?

MICKEY: Innocent? Who-who's innocent, Wayne? Are you innocent?

WAYNE: I'm innocent? Yes I am. Of murder? Definitely.

MICKEY: It's just murder, man. You know all God's creatures do it in some form or another. I mean, you look in the forest, you got species killing other species. Our species killing *all* species including the forest, and we just call it industry, not murder. But I know a lot of people who deserve to die.

WAYNE: Why do they deserve to die?

MICKEY: I believe they got something in their past, some sin, some awful secret thing. A lot of people walking around out there already dead. They just need to be put out of their misery. That's where I come in. Fate's messenger.

Therefore Mickey truly believes that his is enacting a higher, maybe even divine, purpose in his senseless killings. His partner in crime, however, seems to be merely an impressionable youngster who is easily corrupted by Mickey’s charms.

Mickey helps Mallory to escape her abusive parents (through their brutal slaying) and begin a new life. Thusly, Mallory is easily taken in by his evil charms. This is not to say that she is innocent in any way; however, her abusive, incestuous home life certainly did not help in forming her identity. The audience soon realizes that Mallory embraces killing just as readily as Mickey. She also adopts Mickey’s idea that they are fulfilling a divine plan with their destruction. In one instance, the two lovers are out in the desert, supposedly intoxicated, and Mallory conveys her visions to Mickey,

I see angels, Mickey. They're comin' down for us from heaven. And I see you ridin' a big red horse, and you're driving them horses, whippin' 'em, and they're spitting and frothing all 'long the mouth, and they're coming right at us. And I see the future, and there's no death, 'cause you and I, we're angels...

Mallory obviously shares Mickey’s vision that they are divine entities. As the couple storms across the country leaving death in their wake, the media watches their every move.

The role of media in Oliver Stone’s movie is one of the most significant aspects of the film. The story itself is told through varying presentations: sometimes Mickey and Mallory are directly depicted committing murders, and sometimes their story is told through the media coverage that shows recorded footage and dramatized re-enactments of the Knox couple’s deeds. Whenever the aspect of evil is immediately present (as when Mickey begins to lose his temper), split-second frames of demonic faces are spliced into the film. This jarring effect constantly reminds the audience of the sinister side of human nature. In Jonathan Beller’s treatment, *Identity Through Death/The Nature of Capital: The Media-Environment for Natural Born Killers*, he examines the role of the media in the film’s moral implications. Beller assesses the movie in regards to its implications towards real life,

*Natural Born Killers* provides a description of the interactivity of subjects and media in the general constitution of a capitalized media-environment. It has, with a high degree of success, abstracted a matrix of the dominant social relations informing the totality of postmodern society (Beller).

For Beller, the movie claims that the presence of evil in contemporary society is simply taken for granted. Modern society has been desensitized to violence in public forums such as TV and cinema as well as in real life. Moreover, Beller explains that the film openly exposes and discredits the prevalent “lie” of the modern individual that holds “violence is on occasion necessary, attractive to mass audiences, and eminently marketable; sometimes I even watch it, but on the whole, violence is unnecessary, uninteresting and condemnable” (Beller).

Oliver Stone satirizes contemporary media by showing the sickening glamorization of murder enacted by the journalists in the movie. The movie exhibits the mass hysteria that is caused by the Knox couple’s mass murders. In response, the international media have sensationalized the two criminals to the point of absurdity. In the film, the international coverage of the murderers is conveyed to the audience through a cycle of interviews from all around the world. Several helicopter flyovers capture legions of fans cheering for Mickey and Mallory in various state capitals. The film presents several street-interviews in which fans gush over the infamous lovers; one such interview describes the evil couple as American heroes,

You take all the great figures from the States... Elvis, Jack Kerouac, Bukowski, James Dean, Jim Morrison, Angela Davis, Jack Nicholson, Jim Thompson, Martin Scorsese... add a bloody pale of nitro and you got Mickey and Mallory. They're like rebels without a cause, except they have a cause. Only nobody knows what it is.

Soon, the Knox couple becomes an international commodity. They are depicted all over the world in everything from cartoons to movies. The whole world has “Knox Fever,” and it seems that nobody recognizes or minds the horrifying concept that people are rooting for mass-murderers. The rise in ratings prompts Wayne Gale to become even more determined to be the sole journalist coupled with this phenomenon. Oliver Stone’s foremost message concerning journalistic responsibility is that the media’s quest for ultimate ratings through the glamorization and promotion of gratuitous violence implicates them as much as the subject which they exalt. Beller makes reference to a quote by Guy Debord concerning the average person’s complicity in supporting media glamorization,

When analyzing the spectacle, one speaks, to some extent, the language of the spectacular itself in the sense that one moves through the methodological terrain of the very society which expresses itself in the spectacle (Beller).

Beller believes that Oliver Stone employs the concept of media violence to checkmate the assumptions of the culture which takes the spectacle as its legitimate expression (Beller). By doing so, Stone is claiming that the media is accountable for the content of its expression. Stone’s filmexplains that sensationalizing subjects of shock value for guaranteed ratings incriminates the media as much as the particular subject, because this type of journalistic prostitution is not edifying in any way. Such practices are used in every day expressions of media, and the result is that mass audiences have become desensitized to examples of brutal behavior. Beller claims that there is an active participation between media source and audience. Beller likens this relationship to a type of consumerism in which the media is the economy. The audience is actively choosing to view certain programming, and the media is actively producing commodities intended to entice and attract. The media in *Natural Born Killers* is complicit in helping create and exacerbate the Knox phenomenon, and no one seems to be outraged by the murderous couple except for law authorities. Oliver Stone is expressing a two-fold criticism of the fact that the media’s glorification of violence coupled with society’s tolerance for brutality is what has allowed violence to flourish and thrive in modern society. Accordingly, Beller maintains, “as the consumer of these identities we participate in their construction…our consumption of violence is in effect an expression of our relations with each other” (Beller).

As the movie winds down, the Knox couple has broken out of jail and has taken Wayne Gale as a hostage in order to film their escape. As Wayne begs for his life on live international TV, Mickey reminds him that he is self-centered scum, which is why no one has attempted to rescue him. When Wayne Gale attempts to comprehend Mickey’s psyche, Mickey retorts,

You'll never understand, Wayne. You and me, we're not even the same species. I used to be you, then I evolved. From where you're standing, you're a man. From where I'm standing, you're an ape. You're not even an ape. You're a media person. Media's like the weather, only it's man-made weather. Murder? It's pure. You're the one made it impure. You're buying and selling fear. You say "why?" I say "why bother?"

As Mickey and Mallory seal Wayne’s fate with gunshots, the camera pans to a news anchor who is speechless. A news reel then starts to cycle through a series of footage clips depicting contemporary evil aspects of society such as the Waco Seige, the Whitman murders, the OJ trial; among others. Oliver Stone uses the climax of Wayne Gale’s death to slide into a flip-book style of pictures and footage that connect his macabre concerns with real life examples. In reference to the development of his film, Oliver Stone is quoted as saying,

When we set out to make *Natural Born Killers* in late 1992, it was surreal. By the time it was finished in 1994, it had become real. In that warped season of the witch, we saw Bobbit, Menendez, Tonya, O.J., Buttafucco, and several dozen other perverted celebrities grasp our national attention span (Oliver).

Along with those tragedies, in the time in which the movie was being developed, there was also the Waco Seige and the Ruby Ridge Incident; both of which were comprised of media coverage that far outlasted the public indignation that should prevailed.

Countless examples of public perversity and attraction concerning human evil can be revealed with just a cursory observation of contemporary media. For example, on the 15th anniversary of the Oklahoma City Bombing, Rachel Maddow presented a show that unveiled audiotapes in which Timothy McVeigh can be heard discussing his terrorism and ideals. There is nothing edifying in such a presentation, there are no intellectually relevant facts to be gleaned from the ramblings of a deceased mass-murderer. And yet, the airing of the McVeigh Tapes was the highest viewed show of Rachel Maddow’s to date. Other examples of society’s attraction towards evil can be found with ease. Charlie Manson not only has a website, but there is a forum that one can actually join and share thoughts with other members of the Manson community. Ted Bundy reportedly received numerous letters and visits from women while incarcerated. Ted Bundy even has a fanclub on Myspace. Such examples seem to suggest that modern society holds almost zero concern for the value of human life.

It is interesting to note that when natural disasters occur, “good” people are quick to rally for action. There seems to be a prevalent feeling of shared humanity when the “evil” of nature arises. However, society seems to have accepted the evil inherent in human nature and subsequently there is a widespread desensitization towards human evil. Meanwhile, movies that celebrate human evil such as Fight Club, The Usual Suspects, A Clockwork Orange and Pulp Fiction set records in audience attendance and are lauded by critics as cinematic masterpieces. It seems that human nature is naturally enticed by the macabre and taboo. The allure towards evil becomes a problem when people blur the distinction between having an affinity for violence and actually advocating violence. The media’s glorification of violence notwithstanding, the underlying message in both *Fight Club* and *Natural Born Killers* is that there must be individual responsibility exercised in mitigating human evil.

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