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Confronting the Rise of the Social: Hannah Arendt, *Fight Club*, and the Late Modern World

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Abstract

The past fifteen years have seen much discussion of film-philosophy, especially in what is referred to as cinematic ethics. This approach views cinema as a medium that transcends purely aesthetic dimensions, and argues that it can enhance our relationship with the world through social, political, and ethical encounters. These cinematic encounters can lead not only to critical self-reflection, but in particular instances, may also provide powerful social critique and our conceptions of the world. This paper explores the cult-classic film *Fight Club* (1999) and its capacity for critical socio-economic and existential thought, which, I argue, provides a powerful critique of modern identity, consumerism, and late capitalism. Using the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt, a figure who has yet to be applied in film-philosophical research, this paper provides a novel analysis through the application of Arendt's concept of the social. The rise of the social sphere has occurred in the forgetting of political language and historical concepts, which has led to a totalizing force that blurs the distinctions between the private life of the oikia (household) and the public life of the polis (city). Moreover, in the demise of public and political life, humanity is reduced to the conditions of mere necessity by way of labor (animal laborens) and consumption. What was once reserved for the oikia, such as consumption, is now prioritized in the public sphere, which for Arendt, detracts from political action and higher ends. This paper argues that a synthesis between Fight Club and Arendt's philosophy provides a vital contribution to film-philosophy by elucidating fundamental socio-economic and existential concerns that continue to challenge modern life and meaning.

Keywords: Film-philosophy; cinema; Hannah Arendt; social philosophy; political philosophy; existentialism; society; the social; identity; consumerism; late capitalism

Introduction

The last fifteen years have seen much discussion of film-philosophy, especially in what has been referred to as 'Heideggerian Cinema' by thinkers such as Robert Sinnerbrink, Martin Woessner, and John Hyme. This type of 'cinema' is often attributed to the film director Terrence Malick and considers the relationship between cinema and worldhood. This is an insightful approach to film-philosophy, but as is the case with Heideggerian philosophy, the social and political spheres are often not prioritized. Instead, Heidegger views the *das Man* ('the They') contemptuously—as such interactions detract from our authenticity and fundamental existential conditions through idle talk and conformity (167-168). Moreover, in socio-political terms, Heidegger's work is insufficient for philosophical analysis, as his central focus as a scholar is *ontology* rather than *ethics* (Levinas, 44). When reading Heidegger, his existential phenomenology prioritizes the solitary state of *Dasein* ('being there'), wherein relations with others are viewed as fundamentally inauthentic. Consequently, little attention is given to the development of ethical relationships. Film-philosophers should incorporate multidimensional scholars whose work prioritizes such concerns to explore the social, political, and ethical interactions between cinema and our world. In doing so, there is the possibility of capturing what Sinnerbrink describes in his work *Cinematic Ethics* as moving beyond the purely aesthetic dimensions of film and considering the capacity for ethical and political reflection (3).

Although various philosophers have been used in the discussion of film-philosophy, the work of Hannah Arendt has yet to be taken up by scholars. In this paper, I bridge the gap between Arendt's discussion of the 'modern world' (post-1945) and what I describe as the 'late modern world' (post-twentieth century). Utilizing Arendt's analysis of the rise of *the social* and the demise of the public political sphere, I assert that her distinction elucidates why individuals in the late modern world find themselves socio-politically paralyzed and existentially disconnected. Accordingly, one of the critical characteristics of the social is the shift from *action* to *behavior.* For Arendt, "[b]ehavior is rule-governed, obedient, conventional, uniform, and status-oriented," while "action . . . is spontaneous and creative . . . [and] involves judging and possibly revising goals, norms, and standards rather than accepting them as givens" (Pitkin 181). The utility of an Arendtian film-philosophical analysis is its multidimensionality, which provides the capacity to explore complex social phenomena. By unravelling the implications of the social sphere, it is possible to discern the threat of compliance, conformity, and inaction that threaten a more fulfilling and authentic political orientation. Under our current bureaucratic political and economic models, individuals are atomized and find themselves incapable of meaningful actions, as "no one of us alone can do much to change these patterns" (Pitkin, 2).

To elucidate Arendt's socio-political criticism, the cult-classic film *Fight Club* (1999) is explored to provide a critical analysis of the late modern world, which is an era that not only threatens populations with a

socio-political void, but fundamental existential apprehensions, including skepticism, emptiness, and alienation. As Arendt and David Fincher's film reveal, although we desire to have deeper and more meaningful connections in the world, our identities are often inextricably bound to our role as laborers and consumers. According to Charles Taylor, in his seminal text *A Secular Age*: "Modern enlightened culture is very theory-oriented. We tend to live in our heads, trusting our disengaged understandings . . . we think that the only valid form of ethical self-direction is through rational maxims or understanding" (555). The prioritization of *contemplation* instead of *political action* is a significant concern of Arendt in *The Human Condition*. Unlike the Narrator, the archetypal consumer and daydreamer, Tyler Durden is a person of *action* who sees the world as fundamentally flawed and decides to act upon it. Akin to Kierkegaard's description in *The Present Age*, a modern individual "before taking the step . . . deliberates so long and so carefully that he literally chokes from thought . . . since it is really thought which takes his life. He does not die with deliberation, but from deliberation" (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 3). For the Narrator, everything is weighed, calculated, and questioned, and before meeting Tyler, he is inextricably bound and weighed down by the things he owns. Despite his incessant consumption, he never finds a sense of completion or what Taylor refers to as "fullness," which can be defined as "an experience which unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objects activities and points of reference" (5). This experience, in turn, can provide "a profound inner break with the goals of flourishing" and "the extinction of self" (Taylor, 17). In general terms, *fullness* provides a temporary cessation of instrumental aims and desires through a sense of completeness and unity.

Where Arendt provides the theoretical and etymological origins of *the social*, *Fight Club* provides the concrete, lived experience that illustrates the worldly environment circumscribing late modern conditioning. The intersection between philosophy and film stems from the ethical transformation and axiological juxtaposition of the Narrator, the individual of the present age, and Tyler Durden, the individual of the revolutionary age (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 3). The film's philosophical value stems from the explicit refutation of modern conditioning, expressed in the cinematic 'Platonic dialogues' between Tyler and the characters indoctrinated by consumer-capitalist ideology. Unable to critically self-reflect and see the larger picture, characters within the film are ruled by the behavioral expectations and norms established by *the social* (Pitkin, 178). Accordingly, its influence "presupposes potential choice, the possibility of *mis*behavior" (Pikin, 178) and serves as "a kind of uncritical self-subjection to unquestioned rules" (Pitkin, 179). Tyler diametrically opposes the underlying values of modern society and eventually becomes a pseudo-spiritual leader to the other characters in the film. Through his anti-conformist efforts, he helps others reorient themselves toward a more

primordial, authentic existential awareness—one residing beyond the distractibility and artificiality of modern consumerism and its promises.

As *Fight Club* demonstrates, individuals in the modern world have been swallowed up by the social and spit out with culturally-imbued behaviors and values. Echoing the concerns of Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents,* David McNally refers to this process as the 'zombification' of modern individuals (251-253). To fully account for the implications of modern consumer capitalism, McNally suggests that "estrangement-effects" are necessary to represent everyday life as "bizarre, shocking, monstrous" (6). Although *Fight Club* is often viewed as a 'harsh' or 'shocking' film, perhaps its expressive capacities are necessary to effectively resonate with its intended audience, thus allowing for Sinnerbrink's notion of ethical self-reflection to occur. As Freud was aware, the repressive capacities of modern life would undoubtedly make it hard for humanity "to be happy in that civilization" (100). Although preferable to the state of nature, communal living and the social contract come with tradeoffs.

For Arendt, thinking is "the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable" and that "thoughtlessness . . . seems to be among the outstanding characteristics of our time" (5). Modern individuals, as such, fundamentally lack true thought and *action*, according to Arendt. The banality of modern existence stems from the totalizing forces of *the social*, which govern our psyche, values, and behaviors from childhood into adulthood. As Canovan notes, for Arendt, "[o]ne of her primary intentions is to make us aware . . . to make us look at our age critically instead of taking it for granted as the normal state of human life" (81). Given the power, popularity, and legacy of *Fight Club*, especially its ground-breaking ability to show how films can engage in practical philosophy and social critique*,* I argue that combining it with Arendt's philosophy provides an enriching dialogue between thought and image. By pejoratively expressing the nature of our late modern world, audiences can reimagine, reinterpret, and edify their awareness of deterministic socio-economic forces. To conclude this paper, I address how Arendt's work and *Fight Club* have the uncanny ability to predict and challenge the escalating existential-spiritual crisis in the twenty-first century.

The Rise of the Social and the Animal Laborans

According to Pitkin, defining exactly what Arendt means by *the social* "is far from obvious," and that "[o]ne looks in vain for a definition of these expressions, for Arendt never defines her terms" (10-11). Instead of a complete definition, we often find "quasi definitions of the social" scattered throughout her work (Pitkin, 14). This is a point shared by Margaret Canovan, who claims that with Arendt, "it is not surprising if some loose ends remain to be tied up" (109). Therefore, in order to account for what Arendt means by *the social*, a historical and holistic account of the term must be accounted for by tracing its roots to the

ancient Greeks. Beginning with historical distinctions, Arendt compares "the rise of society" with "the rise of the 'household' (*oikia*) or of economic activities to the public realm, housekeeping and all matters pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family have become a 'collective' concern" (33). According to Arendt, the Greeks did not have a word for *society* as we employ it within the modern world; instead, they had two distinct realms or spheres to describe human affairs. Therefore, society is "the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance" (Arendt, 46). The Greeks had two spaces, public life and private life, that served two distinct functions. Public life was associated with *action*, more specifically, *political action*—the highest form of the *vita activa* ('active life') after *homo faber* (work) and *animal laborans* (labor), while private life was associated with the latter. According to Arendt, *work* and *labor* are "unpolitical ways of life" (212), with *action* being the most *public* and *political* condition of human life. *The social* can be seen as an amalgamation of the public and the private—a consequence of continued growth and expansion of the market economy (Arendt, 28-29). In the modern world, we have forgotten these meanings and distinctions, and as a result, the public and private spheres now "constantly flow into each other" (Arendt, 33).

For Arendt, *labor*, which is "nature's cyclical movement manifests itself as growth and decay" (97), has become the most indicative way of life in the modern world. *Labor* is bound by necessity and is essential for the survival of all biological life; thus, it is the least distinctively human form of the *vita activa.* With the rise of *the social*, modern individuals have been reduced to the primary functions of the household, the consequences of which result in the banality of thoughtlessness and repetitiveness (Arendt, 5). Unlike the more holistically-minded Greek citizen, the modern individual focuses mainly on labour and consumption than Arendtian public life, which has been exacerbated by consumer capitalism. Rather than the possibility and spontaneity conferred by *political action*, individuals are bound to the "phenomenon of conformism," reinforced by rules, norms, and expectations that readily standardize human behavior (Arendt, 40).

In conjunction with our lack of *political action*, the transactional and alienating nature of what we refer to as 'work' leads to a deficient sense of *worldliness*—the capacity to artificially outlast and transcend the "ever-recurring life cycle" (Arendt, 7). This has led to a profound shift in our conception of *work* and *labor*:

> The ideals of homo faber, the fabricator of the world, which are permanence, stability, and durability, have been sacrificed to abundance, the ideal of the animal laborans. We live in a laborers' society because only laboring, with its inherent fertility, is likely to bring about abundance; and we have changed work into laboring, broken it up into its minute particles until it has lent itself to division where the common denominator of the simplest performance is reached in order to eliminate from the path of human labor power. (Arendt 126)

As Marx noted, the commercial nature of capitalism often strips the worker of meaning, spontaneity, and creativity; thus, by "estranging from man (1) nature, and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life-activity, estranged labor estranges the *species* from man" (75). With the competitive nature of life under capitalist regimes (e.g., necessity, finite resources, meritocracy, wealth disparity, and labor transaction), our *species-being* is thereby reduced to the conditions of *homo economicus* ('economic man'). According to this belief, human nature can be viewed as static, unchanging, and fundamentally rational, self-interested, and calculative. However, unlike the liberal economists (e.g., Smith), Marx was critical of this conception of *species-being*, viewing the conditions of capitalism as being responsible for objectification, isolation, distrust, competitiveness, and scarcity, which would, in turn, lead to less altruistic and collective interest (75-78).

For Arendt, *work* is a distinctly human activity, as it allows for the quasi-permanent construction of the common world we immerse ourselves in. However, unlike *political action*, which Arendt places as the pinnacle of the *vita activa*, *work* is still bound in the realm of instrumental goods—in that it provides us with the permanence, stability, and durability to structure and reinforce a world that aligns with human intents and purposes (Arendt, 125-126). Problematically, life in the modern world primarily focuses on 'housekeeping,' as "[t]he victory of *animal laborans*" has become the dominating feature of human behavior (Arendt, 320). Where economic necessity was once contained within "the walls of privacy" and governed by the "human decisions . . . [of] the paterfamilias," *the social* removed the regulatory functions and limitations of the household (Pitkin, 12). In the blurring of the private and public, the sheer extensiveness of 'necessity' now dramatically exceeds familial need, thus leading to "an unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural" (Arendt 47).

With the rise of *the social*, there has also been a significant increase in the bureaucratization of the political realm, which, in its sedimentation of roles, channels, and policies, inhibits the spontaneity and plurality of *political action*. According to Arendt, "bureaucracy . . . the rule by nobody is not necessarily no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its cruelest and most tyrannical versions" (40). Bureaucracy is impersonal, mechanical, time-consuming, and fosters uniformity, leading to deficits in *plurality*—the capacity for distinctiveness through speech and *action* (Arendt, 177-179). Taking part in political life for modern persons involves voting on "expert administrators" that are intended to "solve their specialized, technical puzzles" with the end goal of achieving "growth and development" (Pitkin, 12). Unlike the ancient Greeks, our governments devote themselves to "pure administration," which can be likened to an extensive household (Arendt, 40).

According to Arendt, the loss of political responsibility and *action* pose a significant risk for future generations:

> The last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the overall life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, 'tranquilized,' functional type of behavior. (322)

Without the demarcation between the polis and household, the spheres eventually swell and corrupt, whereby economics totalizes politics, and we then lose our sense of *worldliness* and civic duty. As the *animal laborans* ('labor') has overcome *homo faber* ('work') and *zoon politikon* ('political action'), bureaucracies, corporations, and elites infiltrate both media and political systems, leading to the manipulation of public opinion and our government institutions. Although modern economics has helped to increase overall wealth and prosperity, it has also contributed to significant wealth inequality, economic crises, compromised elections, and environmental destruction (e.g., the Dot-Com Bubble, the Great Recession 2008-2009, the Cambridge Analytica data scandal, the Anthropocene, among others).

In a mass society, individuals often feel as though they are interchangeable parts or cogs. As Pitkin notes, modern individuals find themselves "so organized that each is arrayed separately and competitively against the rest, yet all affecting each other so that their activities result in large-scale consequences that none of them can control or even intentionally influence" (187). Strangely, we are supposedly free but feel unable to truly act. According to Arendt, "the monolithic character of every type of society, its conformism which allows for only one interest and one opinion, is ultimately rooted in the one-ness of man-kind" (46). Although modern independence and autonomy should be liberating, individuals find themselves cut off from others, resulting in loneliness, alienation, and meaningless. As Arendt warns, "it is quite possible that the modem age—which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity—may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known" (322).

Fight Club, Behavior, and Conformity

Fight Club is a film that confronts and challenges various concerns in the late modern world, including capitalism, consumerism, identity, isolation, loneliness, meaninglessness, and despair. Though scholars have yet to recognize and write about *Fight Club's* possible relationship to *the social*, I believe that the multidimensional nature of the film and the concept provides a unique critical perspective. To expand on this claim, I contend that *Fight Club* does not just tackle capitalism or consumerism or modern masculinity, but something far more complex and intricate. *Fight Club* is

not merely critical of an economic system or consumerist lifestyle, but the very 'space' we share and occupy with others, including our relationships, interactions, values, and worldviews. Although *the social* is a somewhat nebulous term, I believe that conceptually, it has the capacity to orient the complex socio-political and philosophical critique provided by *Fight Club*. Thus, *the social* can help scholars avoid the propensity to reduce and thematize the film in ways that denigrate its historical and cultural significance.

I agree with Hanna Pitkin's assessment of Arendt's description of *the social*. Not only does Arendt seem quite hostile towards *the social*, but she makes it sound almost monstrous and destructive, using terms such as "absorb," "devour," "intrude," "conquer," "control," "pervert," "impose," "demand," "refuse to admit," and "try to cheat" throughout *The Human Condition* (Pitkin 4). As Pitkin states, "Arendt writes about *the social* as if . . . [it] had fallen upon us intent on deliberating, absorbing, and ultimately destroying us, gobbling up our distinct individuality and turning us into robots that mechanically serve its purposes" (4). In terms of film-philosophy, I believe that *Fight Club* confronts many of these concerns by posing fundamental onto-existential questions throughout the film. For example, what purpose do we serve in the late modern world? Given the conditions, how can we derive a sense of meaning or purpose? Furthermore, how is one to live before they die? For most of the Narrator's life, these fundamental questions have either been avoided or remained obscure, as all of his actions have been entrenched in *the social* and economic spheres of existence. Antithetical to the Narrator's comfortable, convenient, and consumerist worldview, Tyler's character is there to awaken, disrupt, and destabilize those "[e]ntranced by this sorcery," which is "the equivalent of magic-caps pulled over our eyes and ears" (McNally, 113). In this process, Tyler helps the Narrator wake up from his sleepwalking and revaluate his daily habits and underlying values, fears, and motivations—often striking at the fundamental core of modern existence. Akin to Dmitry Fyodorovich in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Tyler is willing to confront the implications of *radical freedom*: "Our fathers were our models for God. If our fathers bailed, what does that tell you about God? . . . This is not the worst thing that can happen . . . We don't need him!" (*Fight Club*).

Before Tyler's psycho-behavioral interventions, the Narrator's life is plagued by apathy, emptiness, and discontentment. He exists as though he is neither fully alive nor dead—zombielike, a member of the social masses under consumer-capitalism, as "unthinking and exploitable collections of flesh, blood, muscle, and tissue" (McNally, 4). Having no rootedness in the world, the Narrator accepts the empty void that is his life as he robotically counts down the days until his death: "This is your life and it's ending one minute at a time" (*Fight Club*). The terrifying irony of the Narrator's life is that even with good health, a nice home, a good job, and a steady income—all of the things we are told should bring us happiness

and fulfillment—still leaves the character living an empty, unsatisfying life. Ethically and spiritually, the Narrator's life is vacant, and no matter how many C.K. shirts, DKNY shoes, and pieces of IKEA furniture he buys, he cannot fill the chasm of the modern crisis of meaning. The Narrator is young, affluent, and college-educated, but like many others in the late modern world, he finds himself bound by the conditioning of *the social sphere*. His inherited 'behaviors' and 'habits' make him feel like he is living his life on autopilot. Even with our all-extraordinary economic achievements and incredible efficiencies, "these . . . capacities somehow have not made people happy or free or even powerful" (Pitkin, 7).

As Arendt recognizes in *The Human Condition*, there are meaningful intrinsic motivations that cannot be replaced by the conveniences and solutions to modern life. In the late modern world, we find ourselves bound by "social categories [that] are arbitrary, formal, empty, devoid of any substantive point or purpose beyond that of sheer classification itself" (Pitkin, 184). In a sense, we are what we do in *the social*; we are our jobs and the things we own, which organize and categorize us accordingly. Given the division of *labor* and the rise in specialization and professionalization, our lives are tied to specific roles and functions. However, as Marx warns, under such conditions, "the worker's activity is not his [own] spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self" (74).

Unlike the members of the polis, in the modern world, we do not have the time, capacity, and vested interest to act upon *all* the news and information we receive. Due to mass consumption and mass information, the data we receive is almost always disposed of and quickly replaced. As consumers, we passively accept, digest, and move on—always seeking something new. This is an important point brought up in the film by Tyler Durden, who very apathetically and un-politically confesses: "Murder, crime, poverty. These things do not concern me. What concerns me are celebrity magazines, television with 500 channels, some guy's name on my underwear" (*Fight Club*). In these lived experiences, the audience can critically self-reflect, which I find essential, as reflection helps us to think as per Arendt's proposal in the prologue of *The Human Condition*: "What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing" (5). Throughout *Fight Club*, the characters show the reality of life within our late modern *social sphere*. The dialogues are postmodern-Platonic in nature, often presenting Tyler as a Socratic figure and the Narrator as an interlocutor. Here, Tyler is meant to help 'show' the Narrator an escape from the cave—the life beyond the comforts and conveniences of the weekly *labor-consumption* cycle.

Tyler is meant to critically and satirically get us all to reconsider what we are doing in the late modern world. Like Socrates, he is a gadfly willing to question and challenge our basic assumptions critically. During the first conversation between the Narrator and Tyler at Lou's Tavern, the audience can see Tyler employing the Socratic method. Here, Tyler often

questions, which the Narrator often lazily or half-heartedly answers. Unfortunately, like many modern individuals living life unconsciously, the Narrator often neglects thinking—especially in a critical sense. Though he often talks to himself, he does not genuinely question the world around him enough. Like Socrates in *Meno*, Tyler probes the Narrator with various questions and concerns to help him extract the truth he already has. Eventually, Tyler presents him with the critical onto-existential question: "What are we then?" To which the Narrator says: "I don't know, consumers" (*Fight Club*).

In an increasingly complex and populated world, our *actions* feel as though they have little to contribute to the world. According to Carl Jung: "As a social unit he has lost his individuality and become a mere abstract number in the bureau of statistics. He can only play the role of an interchangeable unit of infinitesimal importance . . . it seems positively absurd to go on talking about the value or meaning of the individual" (10). In our busy lives, we neglect the deep questions that may challenge our normative behaviors and ways of life, and as a consequence, we avoid taking risks. For this reason, Søren Kierkegaard warns that "[t]he greatest hazard of all, losing one's self, can occur very quietly in the world, as if it were nothing at all. No other loss can occur so quietly; any other loss—an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc.—is sure to be noticed" (*The Sickness Unto Death,* 32-33). *The social* prefers for us to follow rather than lead our own lives. As Pitkin recognizes, these 'socially constructed' norms and standards "are always essentially created by someone else" (184). As such, we are conditioned at an early age on how to act, what to learn, and what to value—even our sense of self is often a reflection of how others perceive us. We become accustomed to following others and fitting in, as such behaviors prevent us from acting unpredictably, spontaneously, and uncharacteristically—all of which present risk. Adhering to *the social* allows us to live safely and comfortably based on principles of conformity and sameness. Acting out means that we face being deemed a pariah or outcast.

The film touches on these tendencies. As Tyler and the Narrator discuss, the path that has led them to their unhappiness is primarily based on a willingness to follow others, especially various authority figures. Tyler admits during the film: "My Dad never went to college, so of course it's real important that I go. So I graduate, I call him up long-distance and say, 'now what?' He says, 'get a job.' So, I'm 25, I call again and say, 'now what?' He says, 'I don't know. Get married'" (*Fight Club*). To which the Narrator states: "I can't get married. I'm a thirty-year-old boy" (*Fight Club*). These 'paths' are often standardized in the modern world, we are expected to follow a rather structured right of passage— through grade school (ages five to seventeen), college or university (ages eighteen to twenty-two), then perhaps graduate school or enter the workforce, then marriage, buy a car, buy a house, and then maybe have some children. Along this timeline, individuals are often constantly comparing

themselves to their peers. The problem is not that this path is necessarily good or bad, but that we readily follow them without question.

As Canovan notes about modern individualism, Arendt "constantly deplores the apparent loss of the capacity to act in modern times, and stresses that modern men no longer act, but only participate in processes and behave in a conformist manner" (108-109). Our adherence to behaviors and conditions can be dehumanizing and depersonalizing. Given the constant demands and standards from *the social*, Pitkin claims that the modern world shapes what can be considered "unreal individuals" (185). We become swallowed up by "[t]he 'they'" who create "the norms and categories" that govern our lives more than we do (Pitkin, 184). Consequently, it is as though everyone is following the orders of this autonomous mass, but no one is stopping to question its guidance because, with *the social*, there is no one person to ask. As Pitkin notes, "society seems to bent on making us behave, as an irritated parent might impose rules of conduct on children" (14). Given the continuous presence of norms, rules, and expectations throughout our lives, we lose a powerful sense of freedom as various deterministic and influencing factors press upon our lives.

Overcoming Our Modern Programming

Like the Underground Man in Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground,* Tyler Durden realizes that critical dimensions of life are being passed over in the modern age. Dostoevsky refers to freedom as our 'most profitable profit,' which is constantly challenged by self-interest and determinism. According to Dostoevsky, we can exchange all the profit and progress of the world, but freedom is one thing that must surpass our desires for certainty and progress. Characteristic of the modern age, economic and social sciences have employed technical and scientific tools to determine how humans act and live. Arendt is opposed to such thinking, as these frameworks reduce human beings to general principles that neglect the primacy of freedom. These 'explanatory' models often claim that to be a 'good' X, then do Y—or given that we know A, then B should follow. For characters like the Underground Man and Tyler Durden, humans are not meant to live within such rigid, rational frameworks. The prescriptive claims made by scientists, social scientists, and philosophers neglect the particularities of individuals, and instead, try to reduce the masses according to general principles.

As Arendt claims, "[i]n reality, deeds will have less and less chance to stem the tide of behavior . . . Statistical uniformity is by no means a harmless scientific ideal; it is the no longer secret political idea of a society which, entirely submerged in the routine of everyday living, is at peace with the scientific outlook inherent in its very existence" (43). Scientific and social scientific frameworks wish to determine our behaviors, and in doing so, make calculations based on man having a fixed essence or fundamental nature. These methods, however, strip individuals

of their qualitative distinctions and reduce them to data sets that seek to minimize deviations. As a consequence, our existence becomes unnaturally formulaic and uniform.

In a spontaneous and unpredictable act in *Fight Club*, Tyler turns to the Narrator and asks him to hit him as hard as he can. Though the act of striking someone may seem trivial or pointless, in Eastern traditions such as Chan and Zen Buddhism, these actions are meant to 'transmit' a particular message or to 'shake loose' pre-existing knowledge. In certain instances, one may be so bound to a particular doctrine or mode of thinking that various masters have used this technique to awaken their students in ways that words are unable to accomplish. In the Western tradition, we often assume that 'words' and 'language' are the only forms of meaningful expression. In the film, the Narrator first refuses Tyler's request, as such an act goes against common sense and standard behaviour. However, he eventually concedes, which leads to the Narrator's first fight with Tyler. Much to his surprise, the Narrator finds something awakened in him after their fight—something buried in his psyche. This sudden shock to his worldview is precisely what the Narrator needed to let go of his perfectly controlled and organized existence. The Narrator finally begins to move beyond 'what he thinks he knows,' and he realizes that his whole life—the job, the apartment, the clothes, the IKEA furniture—is just a part of a mundane, routine lifestyle.

In a sense, getting 'punched in the face' somehow dislodges him from the binds of *the social*. As the Narrator admits: "We all started seeing things differently. Everywhere we went, we were sizing things up" (*Fight Club*). The Narrator and Tyler begin to study the world and its strange expectations. Who you 'believe' you are in *the social sphere* means very little, yet we constantly allow ourselves to be guided by these opinions. In the Narrator's case, he finally stops pretending to 'fit in' with the herd at his office. For years, he followed suit—he wore the outfits, travelled across the country, and completed his boss's primary objectives—only to feel as though his life was being wasted for reasons unbeknownst to him. Having finally let go of these concerns, the Narrator lives the way he wants. Acting against the robotic office standards, his boss tells him: "You can't smoke in here. Take the rest of the day off. Come back Monday with some clean clothes. Get yourself together" (*Fight Club*).

Tyler's spontaneous *action* sets off a chain reaction that helps change the life trajectory of countless individuals in the film. In the Arendtian sense, *action* has the ability to make a change and to bring something new into the world. As the Narrator eventually says in defiance of the world's totalizing uniformity: "I got right in everyone's hostile little faces. Yes, these are bruises from fighting. Yes, I'm comfortable with that. I am enlightened" (*Fight Club*). Though the act of fighting may appear wholly irrational and stupid, perhaps we must reconsider what a rational life looks like. Being caught in despair, individuals often continue to bury themselves with negativity rather than reach out, change, or find

meaningful forms of connection. *The social* offers us a variety of self-medicating forms of entertainment, distraction, and pleasure, and though these may be enjoyable, they are nevertheless temporary and constantly need renewal. For the Narrator, the rational life was working a job as a recall coordinator, flying around the country to calculate risk assessments, serving corporate America, and supporting corporate managers that claim: "Efficiency is priority number one. Because waste is a thief" (*Fight Club*).

In the weeks after the initial fight, more individuals eventually want to join Fight Club. This ultimately leads the group to the basement of Lou's Tavern. Above ground, these individuals are governed by an Apollonian rule-bound and highly-ordered existence. However, spending their entire lives in this 'ordered realm,' they feel as though parts of themselves have been deeply repressed. Like Dostoevsky's Underground Man, who critiques Nikolai Chernyshevsky's 'natural man'—an individual who lives his life based on rational self-interest and progress principles akin to *homo economicus*—Tyler and the Narrator find their freedom underground, as it is a 'space' that allows them to be irrational and act against their modern programming. Above ground, these group members are always expected to adhere to a particular role and function; however, underground, they have the opportunity to rediscover a sense of individuality beyond *the social sphere* and its expectations. As the Narrator says when seeing a male advertisement on the bus while en route to Fight Club: "I felt sorry for the guys packing into gyms, trying to look like how Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger said they should" (*Fight Club*). Tyler responds by laughing at this socially-architected expectation for men: "Self-improvement is masturbation. Now self-destruction . . ." (*Fight Club*).

Like the Underground Man, who refuses to get medical treatment for his ailments, Tyler relishes in the fact that he *can* choose to act against self-interest and the need for constant 'self-improvement.' What Tyler importantly recognizes about *the social* is the fact that it is an illusion, a mirage to push us towards compliance and false notions of 'completeness.' Self-improvement has become the addiction of modern life—we always want more, and we always want to be better. This has become fundamental for modern marketing and advertising. Problematically, *laboring* and consuming never bring about a lasting sense of fulfillment or sense of closure. As Tyler says: "Fuck Martha Stewart. Martha is polishing the brass of the Titanic. It's all going down, man! So, fuck off, with your sofa units and your green stripe patterns. I say never be complete. I say stop being perfect" (*Fight Club*). As Pitkin recognizes about *the social*, "[i]t is primarily the social that keeps us from our lost freedom" (2). *The social* convinces one to believe that attachment is a crucial concern to a happy life—attachment to our notions of selfhood, our identities, our jobs, and our things. As Tyler warns the Narrator in the film, these lifestyles end up owning us. Instead of liberating us, they simply weigh us down and make us feel like we are in control of our lives.

Though the individuals at Fight Club feel pain and injure themselves, there is something primordial and liberating about the experience, as it allows them to finally feel something beyond the dullness and comfort of the modern world. Fighting is something that defies all reasoning of *the social*. Underground, the characters in Fight Club commit themselves to Dionysian chaos and irrationality— almost as though they have a cathartic and religious experience: "The hysterical shouting was in tongues, like at a Pentecostal Church" (*Fight Club*). In these moments, the characters are finally stripped of the baggage that weighs them down in modern life. Critics often rush to the question—But why do these grown men fight? What purpose does it serve? I believe that with almost every part of their lives being predicted, planned, and determined by mechanical clocks, calendar time, and expectations, these individuals want to feel *something* outside the limited scope of reasonable actions. In a strange sense, the physical pain they feel is better than the numbness that follows them throughout their daily lives.

The Possibility of Political Action and Revolution

What Arendt would find terrifying about the modern world is its sense of political complacency. Often, individuals do not want to resist the simple comforts of the status quo and ordinary life, as they prefer keeping things as they are. To confront the unknown, one must have courage, which Arendt believes is necessary for real *political action*. I contend that Tyler Durden becomes a respected movie character because he constantly challenges the modern world and its conditioning. He wishes to awaken individuals to the freedom that exists beyond *labor* and consumption, which "are but two stages in the ever-recurrent cycle of biological life" (Arendt, 99). Tyler uses Fight Club, impressive monologues, homework assignments, hazing, and eventual 'communal' housing to help these individuals wake up and act against the socio-economic institutions that enslaved them. For example, as Tyler says in the film: "You're not your job. You're not how much money you have in the bank. You're not the car you drive. You're not the contents of your wallet. You're not your fucking khakis" (*Fight Club*).

In the various ideological confrontations throughout the film, Tyler presents himself as a late modern Diogenes of Sinope—a philosopher often referred to as a 'mad Socrates' (Laertius VI, 54). Tyler's neo-Cynicism allows him to use his charisma and passion to help individuals detach themselves from their subservience. In a sense, Tyler lives by Diogenes' claim that while "[o]ther dogs bite their enemies . . . I bite also my friends in order to save them" (Fiske, 279). Through various teaching methods, Tyler tries to show these individuals what can be born through 'painful' and 'terrifying' confrontations. To overcome their programming, individuals must be willing to strip themselves of their ideologies. Tyler's duty to his fellow man often requires harsh but necessary actions. Like the polis, these individuals meet face-to-face to participate in Fight Club and

later in Project Mayhem. Although these meetings are not necessarily political at first, they begin as a therapeutic stepping stone. Fight Club is not about passivity and inactive contemplation, but transformative interactions with others. This point is reinforced by the eighth and final rule of Fight Club: "If this is your first night at fight club, you *have* to fight" (*Fight Club*). One cannot hide or remain idle; instead, they are expected to actively participate as equals. Though Tyler and the Narrator created Fight Club, the group is not theirs—a point that Tyler brings up to the Narrator at one point in the film: "You're missing the point. This does not belong to us. We are not special" (*Fight Club*). Akin to the anonymity of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Fight Club is not about ownership, personal gain, credit, or wealth, thus exemplifying collective goals and achievement. As Tyler states, it is about helping set individuals free.

After arriving at Fight Club, the characters in the film *want* to make a political contribution or connect to something larger than themselves. Beyond their routine life, these individuals want to be a part of something revolutionary or historically memorable. So, Tyler reminds them about the narratives of their fathers and grandfathers—periods in history that were not bound by comforts and consumerism. These periods required men and women of action to shape the course of history, which many characters long for. As Tyler says in the basement of Lou's Tavern in front of a large crowd of bored, unfulfilled, and alienated individuals:

> 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. (*Fight Club*)

Filled with the false promises of *the social*, individuals have been led to believe that things would one day make sense and be solved. Unfortunately, most individuals have little say and purpose in the modern world. For the masses, decision-making and influence are reserved for the wealthy, the privileged, and the elite who emerge from Ivy League colleges and powerful family lineages.

Willing to act on his beliefs, Tyler also embodies a modern-day Achilles—always willing to disobey the status quo and his 'rulers.' Though his actions may appear misguided to some, Arendt would likely praise him for his willingness to act and to engage in transformative processes. Rather than keeping his thoughts within, he uses them to politically challenge the structural powers surrounding him. Considering that Tyler eventually targets major financial institutions (though he makes sure that all employees and security have been evacuated), there is something uncanny about his disapproval of modern economics, especially in the wake of the 2008 Financial Crisis and the Occupy Wall

Street Movement. We late moderns continue to witness a growing financial disparity between rich and poor, resulting from corrupt institutions and corporate elitism. However, even in an environmental-economic sense, with the threat of environmental catastrophe looming, individuals in the late modern world still contribute minimal *political action*. With the bureaucratization of government, we are forced to place tremendous trust in the hands of political elites, who, more often than not, seem bound by *economics* rather than *politics*.

Though Tyler only discusses his 'vision' a few times in the film, there is something anti-modernist about his approach that approves of Ancient Cynic minimalism and the virtues of nature:

> In the world I see. You are stalking elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of the Rockefeller Center. You'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life. You'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. And when you look down, you'll see tiny figures pounding corn, laying strips of venison on the empty carpool lane of some abandoned superhighway. (*Fight Club*)

An initial critique of this view may be in its romanticism of the state of nature, which, as Freud and Hobbes recognized, is something we could not revert to, nor in all actuality, would we want to if we knew the consequences. However, what Tyler appears to identify is a juxtaposition, perhaps a form of 'creative destruction,' which would, in turn, provide the necessary space for something new to emerge. Considering Arendt's notion of *natality*, the initiation of *action* represents potentiality and unpredictability, similar to the process of "birth" (Arendt, 9). Therefore, we cannot instill change without a radical shift in perspective. This capacity for creation and change has the power to disrupt "the inexorable, automatic course . . . of daily life" (Arendt, 246). Tyler, in this regard, offers a new way of life through *natality*—although some may reduce his intentions to mere 'anarchy' or 'anarcho-primitivism.' Through an Arendtian film-philosophical lens, Tyler's ideas and actions can be viewed through a more nuanced and intricate political framework. Reminiscent of Nietzsche, Tyler reminds the Narrator that "[w]ithout pain, without sacrifice, we would have nothing" (*Fight Club*). Accordingly, the great accomplishments of humanity have always come at a cost. Although partially accurate, a potential risk that could stem from this type of thinking would be the propensity for rationalization, which, when inappropriately used, can be used to justify otherwise deplorable acts of violence.

The Late Modern World

In this reflection of *the social*, it would be interesting to know what Arendt would say about our current conception of politics. If politics has become a spectacle in the modern world, and if *the polis* or an appropriate political forum is inaccessible for most individuals, would Arendt be opposed to radical *political actions*? Even if you could get through all the appropriate channels, modern government bureaucracies usually do not make radical

political changes for fear of voter disapproval. Thus, more than anything, modern politics resorts to the analytics of self-preservation to win and sustain political power. By aligning with popular opinion, governments care less about *what is right* than *what is perceived as right.* Unfortunately, this type of politics is far removed from Arendt's goals.

Existentially speaking, humanity has had difficulty coping with the conditions of the modern world. According to McNally, 'the everyday' is not always as it appears, given that the world is often fixed with ideological veils, superimposing fantasy and constructed values in ways that reduce life to biological necessity (251-253). Consequently, as many of the figures in *Fight Club* express, life in late modern capitalism leaves them "lifeless, disempowered agents of alien powers" (McNally, 253). On the one hand, it is challenging to act politically when individuals feel increasingly cut off from others. On the other hand, it is also hard to act against the status quo and resist this form of Being-in-the-world as *homo economicus* ('economic man').

Given that we are bound by the *animal laborans* and "the urgencies of life," we are socialized and reinforced to adhere to instrumental, utilitarian, and economic principles (Arendt, 36). There does not appear to be a clear answer to the complex problem of *political action* in the late modern world. Even though we can acknowledge these problems and concerns, how do we appropriately act on them? Especially with the labyrinth of laws, policies, and bureaucracies currently in place, and powerful corporations and elites lobbying for their own self-interest? With that said, Arendt acknowledges that our current situation is not necessarily hopeless. *Action* brings *natality*, spontaneity, and unpredictability, and therefore, the possibility of change. However, as time progresses and power and wealth are accumulated and amassed by the few, our ability to act and rally against institutional elitism, populist passivity, political inactivity, and social conformity diminishes. In the modern world, the masses have become politically passive and inactive, and although we vote and pay our taxes, we cannot surpass the *economics* of politics. Fundamentally, Arendt would view our *political action* as 'funding allocation,' given that we ultimately vote to decide which party or leader will spend our taxes more appropriately.

Problematically, as Arendt observed in the 1950s, our perception of 'political space,' the location where revolutionary *action* occurs, continues to shrink. According to Pitkin, in the conclusion of her work, "[r]eversing our present drift into the social is everyone's task, and one we must do together . . . The task is . . . reconstituting ourselves: reorganizing institutions, reforming character, contesting ideas" (284). I agree with Pitkin's description of the problem, albeit it becomes increasingly difficult to sway the critical masses to make necessary *political action*. Moreover, I doubt this political awareness will occur on its own; rather, it will likely require a significant push to tip the scales in the right direction. With that said, in the past five years, there have been remarkable *political actions* to

confront climate change and improve human rights, so again, as Arendt reminds us, *action* is necessary, and we need to move beyond mere *contemplation* to invoke changes in the world. Change is possible, but this may require events, circumstances, and even catastrophes that jolt us from our complacent, comfortable, and paralyzed political lives.

Conclusion

In this paper, I focused on the following aims: (1) to elucidate and critically engage with Arendt's concept of *the social*, (2) to illustrate the deleterious effects of this phenomenon in the late modern world through a critical engagement with the socio-political film *Fight Club,* and (3) to consider the problems we face in bringing about *political action* within the late modern world. In this process, I have supported Arendt's conceptualization and criticism of *the social*, bringing it within the horizon of late modernity. Here, I have established how *the social* drives individuals toward passivity and conformity rather than *action* and spontaneity. By investigating *the social* through an interplay of cinema and real-world examples, it can be argued that we enrich onto-existential awareness, which may play a vital role in helping us overcome the late modern crisis of meaning and repetitive cycles of inadequacy and *labor-consumption*. Phenomenologically, *the social* is something that often avoids detection in our daily lives. This makes it an essential subject of inquiry, albeit challenging, given its insidiousness. Where Arendt's work provides the general politico-philosophical concept, *Fight Club* prioritizes the particular by expressing the concrete, lived experience concept within the space or world of appearances. Through dynamic interactions between thought and image, the audience has the opportunity to discover representations that may resonate and lead to ethically transformative experiences. On that point, I believe that more can be said about the relationship between *the social*, late modernity, and *Fight Club* specifically. Moreover, further exploration should be done to evaluate the meaning, representation, and pragmatic value of Arendt's ideas in the area of film-philosophy.

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