オフィスという宇宙：『ファイト・クラブ』とバートルビーたち

The Universe of the Office: *Fight Club* and Bartlebys

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What is an office worker? In principle, it is someone defined as a white-collar worker who works in an office rather than in such places as a mine and a factory. If workers are simply divided into groups according to their workplaces, does any white-collar worker fall into the category of office worker? In his 1951 classic, *White Collar*, C. Wright Mills refers to Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* as "the white-collar man who by the very virtue of his moderate success in business turns out to be a total failure in life" (xi). This well-known character is admittedly one of those white-collar workers who meet their tragic ends, like R. J. Bowman in Eudora Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman" and Theodore Hickman in Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh,* but they conduct business on the road, not in the office.[1] In *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace,* Nikil Saval argues that Mill's term "white-collar" is an umbrella term referring to a wide range of occupations, from clerical to technical to professional, and then he explains: "By restricting my view to the office, I omit many of the larger questions about professionals and politics that he describes" (7). Certainly "the office" is more specific and pragmatic than "white-collar," and yet more must be done to cultivate an environment in which to explore particular office-fiction works like Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 debut novel, *Fight Club*.

Since its film adaptation in 1999—the year that saw the release of the satirical film, *Office Space*—*Fight Club* has garnered critical as well as commercial acclaim, but hardly in terms of the office. The 1961-born author belongs to the post-baby boom generation known as " Generation X." The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains them as " typically

perceived to be disaffected and directionless." Palahniuk's narrator is no exception: he finds himself trapped in material consumerism advocated by corporate America.[2] As the story unfolds, his radical rejection of consumerist values expresses itself in the destruction of his high-rise, well-furnished condominium, and then in the foundation of fight club where members defy societal norms and dignify their manhood through beating and being beaten by them. It comes as no surprise that the novel's paperback edition bears an admiring blurb by the Gen-Xer, Bret Easton Ellis: "With acid clarity *Fight Club* achieves something only terrifying books do—it tells us: this is how we live now." What if, however, we separate this novel from those accepted points of reference as "terrifying books"? This separation allows approaching the text as an overlooked work of office fiction—fiction featuring office workers (e.g. clerks, civil servants, and company employees).

"Clerks were," Saval notes, "once a rare subject in literature. Their lives were considered unworthy of comment, their workplaces hemmed in and small, their work indescribably dull. And yet one of the greatest of short stories is about a clerk" (9). This clerk appears in Herman Melville's 1853 classic, "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street." In his essay entitled "Bartlebys All!" Saval addresses this pioneering office-fiction story, and in particular the titular character's inactivity, to articulate that "office fiction is deliberately and narrowly construed as being about manners, sociability, gossip, the micro-struggles for rank and status—in other words, 'office politics'—rather than about the work that is done in offices" (22). If office fiction is mostly concerned with "office politics,"

Fight Club is among the notable exceptions. It is certainly worth exploring its underexplored aspects as an office novel. In so doing, an alternative perspective will be provided on Bartlebys, including one created by Palahniuk.

The Text in its Context

Fight Club is narrated by an auto recall specialist, probably in his late twenties. Other than that, little is known about him: he is an unnamed employee who works in an

undistinguished building in an unspecified place for an unidentified company. Not only does this characterlessness bespeak his working existence in the novel, but also it typifies the average office workers who have drawn rather insufficient attention in literature. Even "Bartleby" has seldom been acknowledged as an office-fiction classic, despite the fact that it has been recognized since the Melville Revival of the 1920s. Since the time of Bartleby, clerical work has undergone changes in technological advancement. To put it another way, Melville's work was showing an early sign of the coming changes in document production:

> [I]ssues raised by Melville in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" are as applicable to the twenty-first century as they were to the 1850s. The introduction of office machines and the speed-up have done even more to diminish the individualism and full of humanity of workers have come, increasingly, to be less important than the machine, becoming, in effect, extensions of the machine. First the typewriter, and, later, the computer have come to stand between the worker and the finished product. (Johnson 92-93)

The profession of scrivener has virtually become extinct in the U.S. Its decline that had begun in the eighteenth century became more evident in the ensuing century. Bartleby's end overlaps with this declining period. By the mid-1860s, according to M. H. Hoeflich, dozens of mechanical writing devices had been invented, although resulted in technical and commercial failure, and: "By the mid-1870s, the typewriter had attained a form quite similar to what it would be for the next century" (403). Among Bartleby's closest cousins who appeared in the very next century was the unnamed title character of Nathanael West's 1933 office novel, *Miss Lonelyhearts*. In New York, Bartleby works as a copyist at a law office, and Miss Lonelyhearts works as a columnist at a newspaper office. The former handwrites legal documents, but he becomes indifferent to writing. The latter typewrites advice columns, but he exposes his incompetence when working at the typewriter. "Indeed," Benjamin Schreier notes, "we read very little of Miss Lonely

hearts' columns over the course of the novel. With few exceptions, which are acknowledged by both the novel and Miss Lonelyhearts himself to be inadequate, his writing is inaccessible to the reader" (150).

If what follows the typewriter is the computer, what follows *Miss Lonelyhearts* is *Fight Club*. Palahniuk's narrator is an office worker with traveling duties; he flies about the country to investigate car accident sites and, upon his return, works at the computer. No wonder he grows frustrated with such working conditions. Most of his time is spent either in the airplane or in the office; most other time is spent either detailing his car or cleaning his condominium. This is why he falls into the vicious circle of overwork and overconsumption, and this is equally why he slips into sleep disorder caused by job-related stress. So severe is his sleep problem that his doctor advises him to attend night group meetings for patients with fatal prognoses (e.g. degenerative diseases and organic dysfunctions). Thus he has suffered day and night, at work and not at work, and becomes depersonalized by turning himself into someone who goes against the grain of society. While developing chronic insomnia, he develops an alter ego that goes by the name of Tyler Durden. This personality allows his unique self-expression as a cult-like figure with an appealing persona and an arresting charisma, while fascinating Marla Singer—a faker who attends the meetings that lead her to form a love-hate relationship with him as Tyler. The narrator has managed to channel his negative feelings about his job into excessive consumption, but his newly-acquired personality is now rechanneling them all into far more aggressive action—bare-fist fighting.

The narrator and Tyler start fight club literally as a place where members fight each other. It is where he feels himself most—"You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive at fight club" (51)—and it is when he fights that he feels so—"Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered" (53). Inarguably, how he feels at the place results from how he feels at his workplace, i.e. how he overworks himself in stressful situations induced by the alternation of business trip and office work. Among the rules set by Tyler is one that the members paired against each other must fight without shirts and-shoes, let alone suits and ties. In light of this rule alone, the club may sound contrastive

to the office, but is it really? Is there no connection between the spheres of life and work in this fiction? If there is, then how?

The Rules

The rule in question expresses an overlooked aspect of *Fight Club*. As an employee who takes numerous business trips, the narrator speaks of his own relations with other members:

> A lot of best friends meet for the first time at fight club. Now I go to meetings or conferences and see faces at conference tables, accountants and junior exectives or attorneys with broken noses spreading out like an eggplant under the edges of bandages or they have a couple stitches under an eye or a jaw wired shut. These are quiet young men who listen until it's time to decide. (54)

Each time the narrator travels on business, he comes across his club members with facial wounds. While recognizing him as Tyler Durden, these angry youths keep silent. It is precisely because the first and foremost rule of fight club is never to talk about the club at any time and any place. The members of corporate America are associated as members of this group nonexistent in words. Fight club is an organization of those with their work dress shirts off. It is, in other words, the home of those who lead a dual existence as white-collar workers and bare-knuckle fighters. Consciously or not, the narrator stays in contact with them on and off the job, and thus his life manifests itself as an extension of his work.

Palahniuk's office-worker narrator can now be seen as more akin to Bartleby. This kinship can best be understood by referring to Bartleby's life on the Wall Street. On one Sunday, he emerges from within the office: "[T]he apparition of Bartleby appeared, in his shirt sleeves, and otherwise in a strangely tattered dishabille" (31). What comes into view behind the door is an office dweller rather than an office worker. His disarrayed shirt discloses that, as long as he makes his home in the office, he places himself on the

work-life continuum. Much the same is true of Miss Lonelyhearts—a modern Bartleby. This unnamed son of a preacher overcommits himself to the job of advice columnist by taking upon the role of a modern Christ. In the last chapter entitled "Miss Lonelyhearts Has a Religious Experience," he gazes in hysteric excitement at an ivory Christ on the wall of his room to achieve oneness with God: "He submitted drafts of his column to God and God approved them. God approved his every thought"(80). When he is at one with God, he is at work as Miss Lonelyhearts, namely as an office worker who has just submitted his paperwork for Him. When his room turns into an office, he turns into an office dweller, just as so does Bartleby. Thus these protagonists locate themselves in the work-life nexus. Foremost among their literary cousins is the narrator of *Fight Club*. After exploding his well-tneded condominium, he moves into the office of the Paper Street Soap Company founded by Tyler. That is, he evicts himself from his home to the workplace to live. This integration of life into work is, as we will see below, relevant to his projection of himself onto Tyler.

If the narrator works full-time by day as a recall specialist, Tyler works part-time by night as a movie projectionist. Their jobs overlap, given the following description: "In the real world, I'm a recall campaign coordinator in a shirt and tie, sitting in the dark with a mouthful of blood and changing the overheads and slides as my boss tells Microsoft how he chose a particular shade of cornflower blue for an icon" (49). When day turns to night, the narrator turns to Tyler. The former operates a laptop projector, and the latter operates a movie projector; the former tastes blood in his mouth when switching from one screen to the next, and the latter inserts a single subliminal frame of pornography into family feature films when switching from one reel to the other. In this way, both characters work a projector. If this is not a coincidence but a choice, then it can reasonably be assumed that the narrator projects his work behavior onto another personality.

It is of equal importance that these two main characters share their rigid stances on work. Tyler reminds his members repeatedly of the first rule of fight club—"You don't say anything because fight club exists only in the hours between when fight club starts and when fight club ends" (48). This rule of secrecy derives itself from the narrator's rule of

confidentiality. Indeed, he must keep quiet about how to calculate recalls, i.e. how to determine whether or not his car company recalls: “Wherever I’m going, I’ll be there to apply the formula. I’ll keep the secret intact” (30). The formula is top secret, and so is fight club; for, in fact, the founder of this antisocial and later criminal group is an organization man. From the very beginning, Tyler is thoroughly acquainted with how to manage the club and to change this for-fight organization into a for-profit one. The reason is that the narrator has worked in an organization of business. Contrary to the broadly-held view among critics, therefore, Tyler and the narrator are not exclusive, but rather reflective of each other.[3]

Since *Fight Club* centers upon an insomniac employee with multiple personality disorder, it seems to be tempting critical readers to seek a wide variety of gaps between his public and private personae. By reading the text as an office-fiction novel, however, one can discover how insurmountably difficult it is for him to escape his office duties, even during his blackout that allows him to become a free spirit known as Tyler Durden. Fight club is originally started by the narrator and/or Tyler. As it grows popular on an underground level, it grows into the Paper Street Soap Company, an organization of terror as well as business, which operates a nationwide network of branches in the name “Project Mayhem.” A question arises here: is there any office-worker aspect to this expanded organization? The next section shows that the answer is positive, but the aspect is negative.

Paper, Soap, and Heaven

As the story evolves, Palahniuk’s narrator finds himself increasingly overshadowed by Tyler. Fight club has been organized under their leadership, but it is radically reorganized under the secretive dictatorship of Tyler. The Tyler personality launches Project Mayhem to deliver terrorist attacks on the consumer culture of the U.S. It turns out that Tyler used homemade bombs to explode the narrator’s fifteenth-story condominium and also used gasoline to explode his boss’s computer monitor at work. Now he is going to explode a skyscraper—“the world’s tallest building”(203)—which may call to mind the

final fate of the Twin Towers, the then-tallest building in the U.S.[4] The majority of fight club members are no longer those with white-collar jobs, but those all in black—black shirts, black trousers, black socks, black shoes, and black coats—who work full-time for Tyler. They are uniformly called "space monkeys." The name can readily be associated with the term used in the Space Age. The space monkeys in this age were mainly trained to investigate the biological effects of space conditions. If they were unable to make sense of what they were doing in space, then it holds true for the space monkeys on earth, in the sense that they, as organization men, are exclusively trained to execute their leader's destructive project without comprehending any possible impacts by their actions.

"Unlike the space monkeys of NASA," as pointed out by Barry Vacker, however, "the space monkeys of Project Mayhem are not used for increasing scientific knowledge to expand the domain of technological modernity, but rather for destroying science and technology by shrinking the domains created by postmodernity" (67). The violence of Project Mayhem is the extension of fight club that engages in acts of physical violence. It ought to be added, however, that the narrator possesses an intense desire for creation through destruction—that Tyler's ultimate goal of the project is not to put an end to postmodernity but rather to go back into history. When they start sharing an old large abandoned house in an industrial area, Tyler gives an enthusiastic speech to the narrator, conjuring an extraordinary image of life in the coming age of cultural depression. In so doing, he stresses the need to create premodern conditions in postmodern ruins. To put it in Backer's words: "The destination is a retreat to Tyler's premodern utopia, where a hunter-gatherer society would forage for food amidst empty skyscrapers and abandoned superhighways" (14). Tyler's utopia is literally an asphalt jungle, wherein humans engage in an incessant struggle for existence against the background of dilapidated cityscapes. This premodernization is represented most by his house as the office of his soap-making company.

As stated previously, *Fight Club* offers very limited information about the narrator. The same holds true of the place in which he is situated.The action seems to take place

in 1990s America, but no details are provided. What is certain is that, after the explosion of his apartment, he lives with Tyler in the office on Paper Street. Why, then, does the author name the street after paper? It is because special importance is placed on this very material that evokes an image of office workers. When Project Mayhem starts, the house becomes the home office for space monkeys: it is where they make soaps as well as train themselves. Upon moving into the place, the narrator finds himself surrounded by piled stacks of *National Geographic* and *Reader's Digest*. Tyler's former owner has reportedly collected those world-famous magazines over the course of his lifetime, and they get taller and taller every time they get soaked with rainwater. There are piles of the magazines in all the bedrooms, one of which is used by Tyler and his sex partner, Marla, who call each other "human butt wipe"(64). Apparently the deteriorated image of paper material is attached to the house.

Tyler's office-house may seem miles apart from an office in general—one like the narrator's—but the former is actually the flip side of the latter. This can best be understood by drawing a parallel with the office depicted in *White Collar*. In the opening passage of the chapter titled "The Enormous File," Mills provides an image of the urban modern office:

> As skyscrapers replace rows of small shops, so offices replace free markets. Each office within the skyscraper is a segment of the enormous file, a part of the symbol factory that produces the billion slips of paper that gear modern society into its daily shape. (189)

The office is not just a place of work, but it is a place of immense paperwork. If Mill's office presents itself as huge files of "paper that gear modern society into its daily shape," Tyler's office presents itself as huge piles of paper that are crumbling day by day into decay, as if resisting the representation of "modern society" or "the symbol factory." It embodies an opposition force against the modern office by falling back into a premodern condition.

The retrogressive image of the office is also evoked by the name of Paper Street

Soap Company. A soap, just like an eraser, is meant to minimize itself to actualize itself; its self-assertion and self-annihilation are just two sides of the same coin as long as its value—use value, to be accurate—lies in the process of approaching as close as possible to zero without reaching zero. Significantly, this view of soap reveals the worldview of Tyler. As the originator of Project Mayhem, he tells the narrator about what he is going to destroy: "Don't think of it as extinction. Think of it as downsizing" (124). The world actualizes itself if it minimizes itself. This reductionist idea is inarguably derived from the narrator. Near the novel's end, his suspicion turns to conviction—"Tyler Durden is my hallucination" (168). At last he realizes what will happen to the world if he is assailed again by hallucinations. It is at this moment that he feels an explicit desire for death: he attempts to recover his own selfhood by killing the other in himself; it is an attempt to minimize himself to actualize himself. Herein lies the reason why he shoots himself: "I'm not killing myself, I yell. I'm killing Tyler" (205). The result of this half-killing is purposefully ambiguous.

In the novel's epilogue, the narrator believes to be in heaven that resembles an acute-care institution, where he remains in touch with Marla and remains identified by some fight club members as Tyler. Even on the last page, the reader is unsure whether he is successful in killing only Tyler.

In either case, the point is that killing his alter ego leads inevitably to keeping his office-worker ego alive. Never does he quit his job until the last moment of his life, despite the fact that it has frustrated him so much as to let his split personality kill his boss. It is then worth asking what is meant by the following description and conversation:

> I've met God across his long walnut desk with his diplomas
> hanging on the wall behind him, and God asks me, "Why?"
> Why did I cause so much pain?
> Didn't I realize that each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of
> special unique specialness?
> Can't I see how we're all manifestations of love?

> I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God's got this all wrong.
> We are not special.
> We are not crap or trash, either.
> We just are.
> We just are, and what happens just happens.
> And God says, "No, that's not right."
> Yeah. Well. Whatever. You can't teach God anything. (207)

Since he is of the firm opinion that we humans are as we are, he disagrees with God. To put it in some critic's words, "in the concluding exchange between the protagonist and 'God,' the latter is portrayed as a bureaucrat that is no longer able to exert a hold over the former" (Cleveland 397). The conversation that describes the shift in the power relations between the Creator and the created is the culmination of the novel's office politics—politics that is, as stated before, of central interest in office novels in general. At the same time, it is of particular significance that God in question is presented as an official, or literally an office worker, who sits behind a desk and writes notes on a pad. The after-world is an office as well as an abode, which is to say that the narrator has situated himself in the continuum of office space, from the car company's office to the soap company's office to the supposed heaven's office. Thus he is certainly an office dweller: there is no outside of the office as long as he moves from office to office. This discovery reinforces his literary kinship with other office-worker protagonists as Bartlebys.

The Work-Life Continuum

Bartleby's actual work period is less than three days, yet the title refers to him as a scrivener. Likewise, as discussed earlier, *Miss Lonelyhearts* tells the story of a writer known only by his pseudonym for work. Taken together, their professional existence equals—or even eclipses—their personal existence. This is also the case for *Fight Club.* As we have seen, the narrator is nearly at all times in work surroundings, whether in the

office or not, whether on the job or not, and whether in this life or not. Having said that, the novel exposes its thematic relationship with twenty-first-century office novels—and Don Dellilo's filmed novel, *Cosmopolis,* is chief among them. It portrays an eventful day in the life of Eric Packer, a cyber-capitalist tycoon in his late twenties, who takes an extended limousine trip across New York City. Although his main office is located in the intelligent tower called "The Complex," it is, in effect, his high-tech car equipped with television screens and computer monitors that serves to conduct his business of global trade. "Even at the firm," his ex-employee reflects, "it was not easy to find his office. It changed all the time. Or he voided it to work elsewhere, or work wherever he happened to be, or work at home in the annex because he did not really separate live and work, or to travel and think, or to spend time reading in his rumored lake house in the mountains" (64). In brief, Packer's actual office is where he is; and now he lives the majority of his life in his mobile office. His combination of work and life is an ultimate form of the work-life continuum embodied originally by Bartleby.

In this light, *Fight Club* can be said to illuminate a particular type of fiction that concerns itself with how offices embody personal milieus as well as political relations. What awaits office-dwelling characters is a wide range of fatal incidents, most of which occur when their jobs overshadow and even occlude their lives. If they have no life outside of the office, the work-life continuum on which they place themselves emerges as an exclusive sphere of life. It is therefore in the natural course of events that when they leave behind the sphere, whether by chance or by design, they enter into the sphere of death: Bartleby is found dead in the city prison sometime after he is removed by his incensed landlord from the law office; Miss Lonelyhearts is shot to death by his former correspondent just after he rushes out of his home office; Packer is shot dead by his fired employee shortly after he leaves his limo office; and Palahniuk's narrator shoots himself to death soon after he abandons Tyler's rented house/office on Paper Street. In these manners, the office is of literally vital importance to the individual dwellers: it is an artificial biosphere where they are unknowingly facing the question of whether to be or not to be. The works featuring Bartlebys are capable of dealing with the office as an issue of

its own and thus as an emergent universe of discourse, no matter whether they are considered literary or genre fiction.

Notes

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[1] More specifically, Willy's former boss, Frank Wagner, promised that he would no longer travel on the road, but work in the office. When Willy's boss becomes Frank's son, Howard, however, his earnest request for relocation is flatly refused—"But you're a road man, Willy, and we do a road business" (288).

[2] If the narrator was an actual corporate office employee, he would have greatly interested Jill Andresky Fraser, whose best-known work, *White-Collar Sweatshop*: *The Deterioration of Work and Its Rewards in Corporate America*, was conceived in the year that saw the publication of *Fight Club*. In the introduction, she describes how unfulfilled her interviewees are: "They told me about ever-increasing workloads, time pressures, and other job stresses; unrealistic employer expectations; declining levels of career and financial security. Less emotional attachment to the workplace. Less time and energy for the family" (11).

[3] A few critics find the two main characters to be not polar opposites but similar images. Among them is Graham Matthews: "Rather than presenting a clear division between the self and the other, *Fight Club* insists on the illusionary character of the autonomous stable ego" (63). His Lacanian claim is that the ego furnishes the subject with an illusion of stability and/or permanency.

[4] As commented by many, *Fight Club* turns out to have been prophetic: "*Fight Club* thus previews the 'unforeseen' event—September 11—endlessly foreseen in the popular novels and films of the preceding decade" (Steltzer 103).

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オフィスという宇宙
――『ファイト・クラブ』とバートルビーたち ――

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論文要旨

本稿はチャック・パラニューク(Chuck Palahniuk)のデビュー作であり、映画化もされた代表作『ファイト・クラブ』(*Fight Club*)を、ハーマン・メルヴィル「書写人バートルビー」(Bartleby, the Scrivener)に代表されるオフィス・フィクションとして読む。2001年の同時多発テロを予見していたとも読める本作は、資本主義に対する社会批判として読まれることが多い。会社員である無名の語り手は、満たされない精神を物質で満たすことができず、その反動として破壊衝動を満たすための集団ファイト・クラブを結成し、ついにはテロ集団へと変容させる。このように過激な内容と急激な展開を特徴とする一方、語り手の言動にはオフィスワーカーとしての日常が大きく関係していることはほとんど注目されてこなかった。例えば、彼のオフィスワークの一つはプロジェクターを扱うことであるが、彼の分身であるタイラー・ダーデンも映写技師としてプロジェクターを扱う。あるいは、ファイト・クラブはタイラーの過激思想の影響下にあるが、この集団が組織として発展していくのは語り手が会社員という組織人であることが関係している。そして高層コンドミニアムを爆破してタイラーが設立した会社の事務所に移り住むのも、語り手がオフィスに居場所を求めようとする無意識の表れである。そして、自己に潜むタイラーを抹殺するために死を図った語り手は、天国らしき場所で覚醒し、ペンを片手にデスクに座る神らしき人物と対峙する。すなわち、死後の世界さえも生前のオフィスの延長のように描かれている。このように考えると、オフィスという空間に居続ける語り手は、書写人としての仕事を放棄しつつもオフィスに執拗に居続ける ―― それ以前も郵政省の下級職員というオフィスワーカーであったらしい ―― バートルビーの末裔であり、本作はオフィス・フィクションの系譜に属していることがわかる。かくして本稿は、アメリカ文学史に潜むバートルビーたちを発見する契機を提示しながら、オフィスという一般的な空間の特異性を考察する。