UDC 821.111(73).09-31:82.01 Palahniuk C.
821.111(73).09-31:[316+32 Palahniuk C.
https://doi.org/10.18485/bells.2025.17.15

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FIGHT CLUB AND INFORMATION HAZARDS

Abstract
Information does not need to be false to pose a risk to social norms and the dominant culture. An uneven power dynamic can be disrupted by revealing (in) appropriate true information. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* presents a rebellion against a postmodern world born through the unveiling of the late-capitalist system in underground boxing clubs. With dangerous knowledge and a legion of loyalists, the nameless narrator's split personality, Tyler Durden, plans to reset society. The present paper aims to investigate the impact of the methodical dissemination of dangerous knowledge in *Fight Club* through the framework of information hazards. The results reveal that information hazards are crucial to both Durden's operation and the retention of the novel's subversive essence despite its mainstream appeal.

Key words: *Fight Club*, information hazards, subversion, power imbalance, information asymmetry, ideology

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The author is a scholarship recipient of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (contract number: 451-03-3605/2025-03/3505).

1. Introduction

That knowledge and power are inextricably linked has been a fundamental truth since ancient times. The inequality that can be observed when two parties involved in a matter are not privy to the same information inherently results in a power imbalance. In a broader sense, numerous power imbalances between groups bring about social stratification and, by extension, the division between high and popular culture. Thus, cultural theorist John Fiske (2010) understands popular culture as being rooted in power dynamics, simultaneously perpetuating and opposing them, and representing the disenfranchised classes of society. However, while a hierarchy may be difficult to overcome, finding oneself in the midst of a society that seems to have discarded the very notion of order and centeredness is an even more dire predicament. Having undergone several seismic shifts in the span of a single century, the contemporary Western world appears to have reached a state of pervasive postmodernism and rampant consumerism, i.e. the dispelling of cultural myths, grand national narratives, and the concept of objective truth paved the way for materialism and meaninglessness to supplant those pillars of the old world, as flawed as they might have been. Resembling the spirit of deconstruction, late capitalism prioritizes the process over the result, but instead of rejoicing in the plethora of possible readings and opportunities for meaning-making, the average postmodern consumer finds themselves in a continuous cycle of compulsive shopping, emotional emptiness and social alienation. It is in such a decentered and desensitized world that Chuck Palahniuk situates the nameless protagonist of his 1996 debut novel, *Fight Club*.

In the three decades since its publication, *Fight Club* has become a pop culture staple, an artifact whose plot and, perhaps more famously, twist reveal have been ingrained in the public consciousness arguably as deeply as the plot twists of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999), owing chiefly to David Fincher's 1999 film adaptation. Reflecting on the film's twenty-fifth anniversary, Bradshaw (2024) and Arafeh (2024) both proclaim that *Fight Club* (1999) not only captures the spirit of the 1990s, but also acts as a precursor to contemporary trends like hypermasculine social media influencers. Arafeh (2024) thus posits that social media has only exacerbated the societal and individual anxieties present in the film and praises the continued relevance and applicability of its criticism, as well as its memorable writing. Bradshaw (2024) even

speculates that Fincher's film heralded the era of superhero blockbusters to a certain extent. In this regard, *Fight Club* occupies a unique position, which is worth investigating: not only is its premise predicated on quintessential elements of popular culture, but it has also gone on to have a life of its own, producing new trends and artifacts. Due to this dual nature, Kravitz's (2004) comparative study of Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) and Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) concludes that the former's proclaimed attempt to subvert is itself subverted by its existence as a Hollywood blockbuster, a cog in the larger capitalist machine. The argument here is that abiding by the rules of capitalism, both in-universe and on a meta level in relation to the film industry, underlines the film's artificiality and undermines its acuity, ultimately playing into tried-and-true tropes. Further developing these ideas, Bishop (2006) highlights the sharp differences between Palahniuk's and Fincher's endings and, consequently, portrayals of and attitudes toward Tyler Durden, concluding that ideological infidelity constituted a congenial pitfall in the process of adaptation, which inhibited the story's potency for inspiring social change. Likewise, Parker (2008) posits that *Fight Club*'s (1999) relationship with self-help culture is fraught with contradiction, in that it tackles the issue but does not provide an alternative, reflecting postmodern cynicism. Pettus's (2000) inquiry asserts that Fight Club and Project Mayhem are assimilated into the system they were intended to topple by virtue of the underlying similarities between their modi operandi. Burgess (2012) draws a distinction between the dynamic, consensual violence enacted within fight clubs aimed at unlocking the revolutionary potential of the body and the static, non-consensual violence Project Mayhem seeks to unleash upon society, praising the former for its approach to utopianism. Del Gizzo's (2007) diachronic analysis of the American Dream expands on the idea put forth by Palahniuk himself in the afterword added following the success of the theatrical release that *Fight Club* is essentially a modernized rewriting of *The Great Gatsby*, tracing the commodity culture of the Roaring Twenties to its logical extreme at the end of the century. On a different note, instead of condemning its contradictions, Weber (2010) praises *Fight Club*'s didactic potential, that of a literary vehicle for teaching and applying crucial sociological theories.

While there is ample literature on *Fight Club*, as evident from the abovementioned articles, there are still avenues which remain unexplored but seem to be a natural direction for analyses of the novel. One such avenue are information hazards, which Nick Bostrom (2011: 1) defines

in his landmark typology as "risks that arise from the dissemination or the potential dissemination of true information that may cause harm or enable some agent to cause harm". The key word here is "true": by reintroducing truth to a destabilized postmodern world, new insights can be gained into the novel's themes and particularly the debate surrounding its success. Therefore, the aim of the present paper is to examine *Fight Club* through the lens of information hazards, identify the power relations which stem from information asymmetry, as well as assess the hazardousness of the novel itself or any knowledge presented therein. In addition to Bostrom's (2011) classification, this paper is informed by Esvelt's (2018) and Lewis et al.'s (2019) records of information hazards in medicine and biotechnology, which demonstrate that while sensitive information should be treated with caution, the fear of potential risks may impede scientific progress, thus providing both proof of the perilousness of easily accessible information and an argument against censorship, analogically assisting in responding to criticism of *Fight Club*. The results of this study should expand the literature on *Fight Club* by presenting a fresh perspective on one of its core themes, the danger of knowledge.

2. Information Hazards in *Fight Club*

Bostrom's (2011: 5) typology distinguishes two categories of information hazards, by information transfer mode and by effect, which, working in tandem, "[render] a more fine-grained picture of the ways in which information can be hazardous". The first category includes data, idea, attention, template, signaling, and evocation hazards. The term "transfer mode" refers to "different information formats" (Bostrom 2011: 3), i.e. the manner of packaging and distributing information (e.g. specific data or a particular type of presentation). The second category groups information hazards by effect, producing six classes. These are then divided into types and subtypes, and include the following: adversarial risks (type: competitiveness hazard; subtypes: enemy hazard, intellectual property hazard, commitment hazard, knowing-too-much hazard), risks to social organization and markets (type: norm hazard; subtypes: information asymmetry hazard, unveiling hazard, recognition hazard), risks of irrationality and error (types: ideological hazard, distraction and temptation hazards, role model hazard, (de)biasing hazard, neuropsychological hazard,

information-burying hazard), risks to valuable states and activities (types: psychological reaction hazard (subtypes: disappointment hazard, spoiler hazard, mindset hazard), belief-constituted value hazard, mixed (subtype: embarrassment hazard)), risks from information technology systems (type: information system hazard; subtypes: information infrastructure failure hazard, information infrastructure misuse hazard, artificial intelligence hazard), and risks from development (type: development hazard). Before delving deeper into the subtypes of information hazards by effect present in *Fight Club*, several broad strokes are in order, i.e. the category of information hazards by information transfer mode will be analyzed first.

2.1 Information Hazards by Transfer Mode

There are examples of dangerous knowledge throughout the novel which correspond to each of the six information transfer modes/formats (data hazard, idea hazard, attention hazard, template hazard, signaling hazard, and evocation hazard). The most obvious correspondence lies in the premise: the concept of fight clubs constitutes an idea hazard, i.e. it represents a dangerous idea whose spread poses a risk. As per the explanation, "[s]ometimes the mere demonstration that something (such as a nuclear bomb) is possible provides valuable information which can increase the likelihood that some agent will successfully set out to replicate the achievement" (Bostrom 2011: 3). This is why the first two rules of fight club demand that one not disseminate the knowledge of its existence, to indicate that the idea of it is a threat. Regarding the replication aspect, Kravitz (2004) emphasizes the similarities between fight clubs and Burger King franchises. Indeed, as the storyline progresses, those franchises modeled after Tyler's fledgling enterprise gain a remarkable degree of autonomy, to the point that the founder finds himself frantically scrambling to close the lid of the printer which keeps putting out copies of copies of copies of his idea.

Prior to getting to the specific rules regarding the fights or the subsequent homework assignments within Project Mayhem, the idea of an underground boxing club where the conventions of civil consumerist society no longer apply becomes alluring to men who feel numb and left behind. Fight club is a place where the only admission fee is physical pain, which produces tight-knit communities in a way that no gathering of IKEA loyalists ever could. This escapist fantasy seems to offer a solution to the

meaninglessness of everyday life, in the sense that it creates a temporary vacuum wherein a semblance of order and structure is restored. The narrator's Nietzschean musings reflect this sentiment: "Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered" (Palahniuk 2006: 53). This attitude is reinforced by Tyler's philosophy that absolute loss engenders absolute liberty. Whereas the abolition of objective truth plunged late-capitalist societies into apathy, anarchists and extremists like Tyler Durden can find within that power vacuum an opportunity to impose their will, under the guise of restoring structure and rules. Therefore, mere awareness of such an ideological community is enough to constitute a hazard to the wider social (dis)order.

As a natural extension of the issues inherent in fight club's modus operandi, especially in the initial stages, Tyler's charismatic leadership gives rise to a template hazard. Extending beyond the realm of the novel into the real world, Palahniuk (2006: 211) himself details in the Afterword how "young men around the world took legal action to change their names to 'Tyler Durden'". Furthermore, young men started organizing underground boxing clubs, scarring themselves to emulate the iconic lye kiss, and spraying graffiti, among other things. Thus, the novel's tangible effect on its most devoted readership bears a striking resemblance to the in-universe popularization of fight clubs. In other words, Tyler and fight club provide a model organizational structure on two planes, which, being a "bad role model" (Bostrom 2011: 4), constitutes a threat.

By the same token, emulations of the ideologue and his organization engender signaling hazards. Signals such as bearing the lye kiss, the presence of scars and bruises, addressing the narrator as "sir" or "Mr. Durden", or religiously repeating Tyler's catchy mantras all serve the function of identifying Tyler's apostles as such. Their aim is not exclusively outwardly directed, instead, they play a role in the construction of individual members' new identities. As the narrator declares, "[e]verybody in Project Mayhem is part of Tyler Durden, and vice versa" (Palahniuk 2006: 155). Tyler thus creates a symbiotic relationship with his disciples: his continued existence relies on them as much as theirs does on him. Burgess (2012) highlights an important distinction between the bespoke wounds received in fight club and the social signal that is the lye kiss. The author reasons that "[e]ven the position of the lye burn on the hand draws the attention to the outermost reaches of the body, to the part that will provide the labor for Tyler's demands" (Burgess 2012: 275). The sheer number of Durden's

devotees who give such social signals eventually creates an atmosphere of paranoia and Tyler's omnipresence, since not only can the narrator not escape from Tyler in his own mind, but he is also perennially surrounded by the space monkeys of Project Mayhem instructed to keep even himself in line should he try to undermine the objective. Consequently, every occurrence of "sir" instills in the reader a feeling of dread of what the encounter at hand might entail. The ending becomes grim once the medical staff members begin addressing the narrator in that manner and stating that they are looking forward to Tyler's return, keeping him alive in doing so. Such is the potency of social signaling.

The evocation hazard is particularly relevant when addressing the claims that *Fight Club* defeats its purpose. Per definition, "[t]here can be a risk that the particular mode of presentation used to convey some content can activate undesirable mental states and processes" (Bostrom 2011: 5). Working as a projectionist, Tyler famously inserts pornographic frames into family films, with a view to provoking a subconscious reaction in the audience. Through such subliminal messaging, Tyler seeks to sour the cinema-going experience without leaving enough time for the viewers to comprehend the cause of their distress. Following this train of thought, one might suggest that packaging a subversive, anarchist message as a mainstream Hollywood feature would pose a risk to the established social order.

However, Kravitz (2004: 46) derides Fincher's altered ending where the narrator and Marla hold hands while the credit card company buildings explode as resembling Charlie Chaplin tropes and "[reminding] us once again that everything that has occurred has been staged and reduced to the intertextuality of Hollywood film and history". In his view, the ending constitutes a restoration of balance and, therefore, the triumph of the capitalist system, though it should be noted that Kravitz (2004) believes the film's artificiality to be deliberate. More strictly, Bishop (2006: 53–54) holds that "[a]s a mainstream, commercial Hollywood commodity, *Fight Club*'s message simply cannot carry any substantial weight as a critique of capitalism, and the philosophies of Tyler Durden certainly can't be taken literally". Even though Bishop (2006) acknowledges Kravitz's (2004) artificiality caveat, he remains adamant in his condemnation of the film based on its nature, curiously underestimating regular audience members by stating that they are not as acutely aware of subtext as Kravitz seems to suggest.

Therein lies a peculiar contradiction: Bishop (2006) underestimates the very class he champions. Furthermore, he identifies a problem but fails to offer a proper alternative, resembling criticism that Parker (2008) levels against both postmodernism on the whole and *Fight Club* itself. Bishop's (2006) brief pondering of low-budget films and free distribution leads to a dead end due to the filmmaking process's inherent expenditures. Echoing previous sentiments, Pettus (2000: 125) asserts that "Project Mayhem succeeds not only in reproducing itself, but also in reproducing the dominant system it opposes". Parker (2008: 10) strongly disapproves of the ending, as "*Fight Club* also tells its viewers that a person would have to be crazy to oppose the bourgeoisie or that conspicuous consumption will drive a person mad". The film is therefore seen as intrinsically anti-revolutionary. Nevertheless, a counterargument can be raised.

While the point stands that *Fight Club* has been assimilated into virtually all facets of pop culture, that does not necessarily preclude its countercultural effects. In fact, it is due to the popularity of the film that the novel has gained mainstream recognition. Hence, attention hazards ought to be brought into the discussion to develop this idea. Bostrom makes the following key observation:

> It would be a mistake to suppose that because some idea is already in the public domain there can be no further harm in discussing the idea and referring to it in other publications. Such further discussions can create or aggravate an attention hazard by increasing the idea's salience. One index of how much mileage there is in an idea is the amount "buzz" surrounding it. (Bostrom 2011: 3)

Attention hazards, as their name would suggest, are predicated on accentuating knowledge which is already documented but which can, if used (im)properly by a bad actor, cause damage.

The support groups the narrator frequents deliberately use euphemisms in an attempt to ameliorate the pain of their members, i.e. the act of addressing the issues openly and, therefore, drawing attention to them, is deemed dangerous and is avoided. On the other hand, the narrator and Marla Singer find comfort in those people's suffering. When their attention is drawn to the irrefutable truth of death, they gain new perspectives on life and are effectively transported to pocket dimensions where quotidian pointlessness is forced to face the natural order. A parallel can thus be

observed between these support groups and 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" (Palahniuk 2006: 48). Mentioning fight club outside of those working hours is risky. Parker (2008) elaborates on *Fight Club*'s relationship with support groups and self-help culture, though she concludes that the film adaptation is hypocritical insofar as it addresses the topic on a surface level, without providing a viable solution to the issue of personal malaise. However, there is still value to be found even in temporary solutions. As the narrator posits, "[a]fter a night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down" (Palahniuk 2006: 49). Even a periodical emotional release is preferable to all-encompassing aimlessness. The knowledge that an outlet exists can be a source of comfort, and bad actors' attention being drawn thereto may result in its disappearance. Nonetheless, sharing such a secret can be thrilling, and breaking the first rule is the prerequisite for the formation of a fight club cell to begin with, as Burgess (2012) notes.

In line with Bostrom's (2011) explanation, the mere fact that an idea is mainstream does not neutralize its potential for harm. *Fight Club*'s ubiquity in popular culture does not mean that a similar underground organization will or should be dismissed as a poor copycat, it instead opens up possibilities for the emergence of similar groups. This should by no means serve as an argument for censorship, firstly because the free market of ideas requires individual agency to function properly, and, secondly, as Bostrom (2011) also recognizes, censorship breeds popularity. Moreover, censoring potentially hazardous information can impede efforts to successfully combat its effects. Lewis et al. (2019) detail a case where scientists who wrote papers on a new type of botulinum toxin refused to publicly disclose its sequence for fear that bad actors might misuse it, which ultimately hindered research aimed at counteracting the toxin. The authors conclude that "being overcautious with information hazards can also complicate effective risk assessment" (Lewis et al. 2019: 979). Hence, censorship cannot be a viable antidote to information hazards.

Anti-systemic movements have existed throughout history independently of *Fight Club* or its popularity, and it is a foregone conclusion that they will continue to exist and evolve, but it would be doing both the novel and the film a disservice to claim that they completely fail in reflecting their revolutionary ideas. After all, setting criticism of the film's ending aside for a moment, the novel's conclusion, as noted before,

indicates that Project Mayhem is still very much active, notwithstanding individual interpretations of the narrator's fate with regard to Tyler. That the revolution is not an abject failure is the ending present in the procurable copies of the novel. Depending on one's perspective, this can be seen as terrifying or thrilling. Supporters of Tyler's ideas can find comfort in knowing that his legacy continues on. It seems reasonable to suggest that praiseworthy countercultural ideas should reach a wide audience, whose task it then becomes to evaluate said ideas and act on them if they are deemed desirable, which is a different matter altogether.

Aside from the core idea of fight club, the most frequent hazards by information transfer mode in the novel are data hazards. These are the specific bits of information that the narrator provides throughout the text. In the opening chapter, the beginning of the frame narrative, the narrator details the process for creating nitroglycerin, plastic explosives, napalm, and claims that he also knows how to make nerve gas. He does not take a long time to note that "[t]his how-to stuff isn't in any history book" (Palahniuk 2006: 13). Taking into account Tyler's overarching goal of lifting the burden of history from the world, the subversive function of such interspersed instructions becomes twofold: the casual dissemination of blueprints for explosives or otherwise dangerous chemical compounds gradually undermines the stability of the society in which the novel is set, but the fact that those same blueprints are readily available in a mainstream novel, and in an easily digestible format at that, poses a risk in the real world as well. Esvelt (2018) rightly points out that even Wikipedia can act as a gateway to dangerous technology in the hands of bad actors. To reiterate, the concept of information hazards revolves around true information. Availability alone is not sufficient for producing adverse effects, the key ingredient are ill-intentioned individuals.

In addition to the aforementioned functions, segments containing data hazards contribute greatly to the characterization of the protagonist. The narrator's mind is active at all times, be it as himself or Tyler, and it is overloaded with information of this kind. When Tyler suggests that the narrator mischievously exploit his boss's plumbing, either by using industrial dye or super-high water pressure, the section does not read as a crash course in physics, rather as a character moment wherein the narrator's disdain for his superior is shown. On a darker note, the detailed, user-friendly instructions for adapting the lightbulb bomb to work on computers are not an abridged chemistry lesson: they are buildup for the reveal that Tyler killed the boss.

Needless to say, information that could compromise the social order is not limited to tutorials for making explosives at home or teaching the members of the Assault Committee of Project Mayhem to shoot a rifle. For instance, the bit of trivia regarding actress Angie Dickinson, whose nude scene disappeared one frame at a time as projectionists (like Tyler) took frames of it for personal archives. Knowing the jobs he works inside-out provides Tyler with ample opportunity to cause unrest, and he is certainly not one to sit idly by. Along with his previously discussed part-time projectionist exploits, as a soap manufacturer and salesman, Tyler harnesses the full potential of his position. His familiarity with the history of soap and human sacrifice leads him to conclude that he can use it as an instrument of revolution on two fronts: by repurposing wealthy people's excess fat (which also provides the best collagen, according to Marla) and developing explosives, thereby using the system's own resources to subvert it. While working as a waiter, Tyler infamously employs his bodily fluids to combat fine dining and the elite.

All of the aforementioned examples portray the narrator/Tyler as a world-weary agent of destruction who possesses enough both relevant and seemingly random knowledge in addition to his grand ideas to cause mayhem. His charisma helps him amass an army of loyalists who model themselves after him and proudly showcase their affiliation, all neatly packaged in an underground club for disillusioned postmodern men. In a nutshell, Tyler is precisely the kind of individual who thrives on hazardous information.

2.2. Information Hazards by Effect

The six information transfer modes outlined in Bostrom's (2011) typology are complemented with effects that particular types and subtypes of information hazards can exert. Within this categorization, several stand out as analogous to salient features of *Fight Club*. First of all, adversarial risks reflect multiple levels and forms of conflict in the novel. Enemy hazards revolve around an adversarial force acquiring knowledge and thereby increasing its threat level. As an example, Bostrom (2011) brings up the need to carefully manage the development of new military technology and information leaks concerning it with the aim of preventing rival forces from devising strategies for potential hostile actions. When the narrator and Tyler came to blows physically, fight club was born. Their

second, ideological coming to blows manifests itself in Project Mayhem. The shift in ideology is reflected in the difference between the first rules of each organization: whereas one was forbidden from talking about fight club, one is not allowed to ask questions about Project Mayhem. While the former is essentially an invitation to disciples to spread the word to those who could be suitable candidates, as Burgess (2012) remarks, the latter views knowledge as an existential threat. This is the reason for the fragmentation of information. Tyler is the mastermind and he should be trusted unquestioningly, but no single member is allowed access to the full picture. In this case, the narrator is also left out of the loop. There is room for speculation that a commitment hazard is also possible, whereby knowledge of the full plan might adversely affect the space monkeys' allegiance, but Tyler's selection process exists as a contingency against such unwanted scenarios. If the disciples are willing to undergo his mock-Buddhist deterrence, relinquish their names, burn off their fingerprints, and engage in spontaneous acts of violence, they are unlikely to protest the end goal. The same, however, cannot be said about the narrator. As the rift between the two personalities deepens, the need to keep secrets becomes more urgent.

The narrator's position could be explained via a Venn diagram showing an intersection of enemy and knowing-too-much hazards. Tyler needs to withhold information in order to facilitate the smooth running of Project Mayhem, which includes incorporating precautionary measures into the space monkeys' instructions, such as foreseeing that the narrator would try to sabotage the operation by appealing to authority, himself, and directing his subordinates to punish him accordingly. Moreover, through Tyler, the space monkeys learn of the birthmark that the narrator has on his foot, which, as far as he is concerned, only Marla and his father know. The narrator is a liability since he knows too much, even though he is not aware of that until the final stages of the plan: his realization poses a threat. Suffice it to say, the recognition of Tyler for what he is constitutes a psychological reaction hazard and opens up avenues for numerous embarrassment hazards, such as when the narrator cannot recall having been intimate with Marla during their phone call. Earlier in the novel, Tyler was explicit about not wanting the narrator to talk to her about him, since doing so could jeopardize his schemes. In *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), the revelation that Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father plants the seeds for Vader's eventual redemption and the Emperor's downfall. Armed with

the knowledge of his lineage in *Return of the Jedi* (1983), Luke sets out to bring his father back to the light by appealing to his remaining humanity. In *Fight Club*, the realization that Tyler Durden is a split personality, while world-shattering, prompts the narrator to start devising a strategy against him and is therefore hazardous.

While discussing adversarial hazards, Bostrom (2011) reflects on blackmail, which hinges on the target's obliviousness to damaging information. The narrator and Tyler are thus in the position to use their insider knowledge as a bargaining chip. The scene where the narrator confronts the manager of the Pressman Hotel has him completely emulating Tyler, specifically his antecedent blackmailing of the projectionist union president, and exposing his various acts of refined cuisine desecration with a view to securing an income stream in exchange for no longer reporting for work or causing a public scandal. He reasons that any form of punishment enacted against him would pale in comparison to the enduring damage to the hotel's reputation. In case his blackmail attempt fails, he aspires to portray himself as the champion of the underprivileged service industry workers. Now that the manager knows that the narrator has leverage, he finds himself in a vulnerable position. However, to increase the likelihood of his desired outcome coming to fruition, the narrator starts punching himself, exacerbating the wounds received from the projectionist union's president, while cunningly pleading with the manager to stop hitting him, which is his cover story. Owing to his strategy and precautions, he is free to found more fight club chapters.

Bostrom's (2011) risks to social organization and markets are the building blocks of *Fight Club*. Every action of Tyler's is aimed at disrupting the social order and bringing about a reset. In the film, the reset is more financially-oriented, taking the form of the destruction of credit card company skyscrapers to erase debt records, whilst the original novel's grand plan is more primordial. A norm hazard occurs when there are conditions for "moving to a worse social equilibrium" (Bostrom 2011: 10). Naturally, from the standpoint of the system Tyler seeks to reset, his ideas are hazardous. The overarching plan encompasses all three norm hazard subtypes: information asymmetry, unveiling, and recognition.

Outside of Tyler's machinations, the narrator's day job also grants him access to incriminating information. As a recall campaign coordinator at the Compliance and Liability department of his company, the narrator performs the duties of a postmodern Anubis of sorts. Instead of weighing a

human's heart to determine their fate in the afterlife, he calculates the cost-effectiveness of car recalls and out-of-court settlements. In his words, "If you know where to look, there are bodies buried everywhere" (Palahniuk 2006: 126). Apart from providing commentary on the commodification of human life, this plot point demonstrates that the narrator consistently finds himself in positions where he has access to confidential information, regardless of the specifics of the job in question: he is surrounded by information hazards, but it is up to him (or Tyler) to utilize their potential.

The narrator and Tyler are thus regularly in a privileged position in terms of knowledge. The buyers do not know whether a car has passed all the necessary tests, the cinema-goers cannot assume that there is a pornographic still in their Disney classic, the hotel guests do not expect bodily fluids in their soup, and Project Mayhem's space monkeys receive fragmented information and specialized tasks. It is only when pertinent information is disclosed that the paradigm begins to shift. The mastermind of Project Mayhem thus requires a well-developed network of informants to remain one step ahead: "[W]e have police who come to fight at fight club and really like it. We have newspaper reporters and law clerks and lawyers, and we know everything before it's going to happen" (Palahniuk 2006: 164). As discussed previously, this network creates a sense of Tyler's omnipresence and omniscience. Possession of such information grants the protagonist agency and power over other characters, while his status as a homodiegetic narrator inherently means that the reader depends on him to engage with the text.

The power imbalance between the narrator, his customers, and his superiors is information asymmetry. Coincidentally, Bostrom (2011) uses the car market to illustrate his point. Sellers of quality used cars do not see a financial incentive to put their vehicles on the market because buyers, aware that the average seller knows more about the car than them and is more likely to be selling off a bad car than a good one, do not want to risk paying high prices, which results in the scarcity of quality used vehicles. According to *Fight Club*'s philosophy, companies such as IKEA sell customers products they do not need, but the buyers are blissfully unaware and continue purchasing new items of furniture to make their apartments and themselves complete. If a large portion of IKEA's consumer base learned that, the company would experience a downturn in profits, since the entire business model rests on consumers' ignorance. Thus, information asymmetry can destabilize or devastate a market. Consequently, such a

reveal would constitute an unveiling hazard, as it would lift the "veil of ignorance" (Bostrom 2011: 13).

Tyler's sermons target all facets of postmodern life with the aim of getting his disciples to recognize the reality of their existence. Recognition hazards elicit public acknowledgement. Tyler famously declares: "We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives" (Palahniuk 2006: 149). The absence of grand narratives from the postmodern world becomes salient in sections like this one. Within their shared pocket dimension, Tyler provides an ideological framework to which his followers can cling. If only temporarily, until the advent of Project Mayhem, information whose recognition will have a ripple effect is methodically disseminated to the members. These are Tyler's signature lines about being free to do anything once one has lost everything, not being defined by the things one buys or one's job, and abhorring perfection, among others. Curiously, despite the members' shared disdain for contemporary life, a development hazard can also be found among the many subversive tactics of Project Mayhem: "Mischief and Misinformation Committees are racing each other to develop a computer virus that will make automated bank tellers sick enough to vomit storms of ten- and twenty-dollar bills" (Palahniuk 2006: 145). This is yet another instance of Project Mayhem adopting aspects of the outside world and adapting them according to its needs.

The hypnotic effect of advertisements and entertainment corresponds to the category of distraction and temptation hazards, which fall under the umbrella of risks of irrationality and error. According to Tyler, cultural institutions manipulate people into having great expectations which they cannot reach (information asymmetry). Recognizing that deception will adversely affect those structures. Bostrom (2011) argues that there are areas of life where overestimation of one's capacity can even be desirable, e.g. project a confident and competent image or develop one's entrepreneurial spirit or academic potential through risk-taking. Tyler, however, is a vociferous opponent of self-aggrandizing.

Without a great war to fight, late-capitalist societies are lulled into a false sense of security. The existence of an opposing force provides a contrast, without which everything becomes monotonous. The narrator and Marla are transformed by the support groups, while Project Mayhem acquires another reward tier with the incorporation of death. As mentioned

above, Project Mayhem demands complete dedication to Tyler Durden and reduces the unique, individual fighters from fight club to specialized cogs in the machine, which includes the abrogation of names and removal of finger prints. However, once Big Bob from the testicular cancer support group is mistakenly gunned down by police officers during a homework assignment, the cult begins celebrating him, regularly chanting "His name is Robert Paulson", "He is forty-eight years old, and he was part of fight club", "He is forty-eight years old, and he was part of Project Mayhem" (Palahniuk 2006: 178) as if they were regurgitating Tyler's aphorisms. Death is an act of heroism in Project Mayhem and the prerequisite for having one's name restored and immortalized. Instead of destabilizing the organization, Bob's death reinforces the space monkeys' resolve. In this instance, recognition and public acknowledgement do not directly cause damage to a unit, but the strengthening of the unit in question is a threat to the fabric of the wider society. This is an example of an ideological hazard, as well as a biasing hazard: due to their skewed worldview, the members incorporate Bob's death as a model, as opposed to seeing it as a deterrent. The narrator, however, realizes that the mission is not worth the price of human life and attempts to sabotage the operation. To him, death becomes release from the shackles of Project Mayhem; to Tyler, death becomes martyrdom.

Furious at the fact that he is a middle child of history, Tyler plots to get God's attention by causing mayhem and martyring himself, thus ensuring that his name will be remembered and his life will not have been in vain. In the novel, Tyler arranges the collapse of a skyscraper onto the nearby national museum, which ought to symbolize the destruction of both capitalism and history. The public's recognition of his actions is supposed to develop into utter chaos. The reset in this case would involve creating a blank slate in line with the experiment with the narrator's condominium. When the narrator was delivered from his material possessions and his history, i.e. his identity up to that point, he began to create instead of merely consuming pre-made products. Tyler's vision for the world after the culmination of Project Mayhem is the following:

> You'll hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center, and dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle leaning at a forty-five-degree angle. We'll paint the skyscrapers with huge totem faces and goblin tikis, and every evening what's left of mankind will retreat to empty zoos and

> lock itself in cages as protection against bears and big cats and wolves that pace and watch us from outside the cage bars at night. (Palahniuk 2006: 124)

Society is seen as having reached a point of no return, and the optimal concept for his utopia that Tyler can conjure up involves merging the postmodern world with prehistory. The mythic allusions he makes throughout the novel are reflected here both in the overall theme of regeneration and in the evocation of totems and goblins, a return to a more mysterious and magical time.

Kravitz (2004: 46) points out that Tyler's regeneration of American society through destruction is "a fantasy as old as that of the first Puritan settlers". Similarly, Del Gizzo (2007) views this as an extension of the American Dream as presented in *The Great Gatsby*, in the sense that it glorifies the opportunity to start anew once one is freed from history and celebrates the notion of progress. While a lineage may be identified, this does not inherently deprive Tyler's vision of relevance. Burgess (2012: 278) postulates that *Fight Club* represents a "significant [marker] in the development of a utopianism that is dynamic and adaptive, existing in the present of history rather than in a vacuum of idealism". The myriad pitfalls of Project Mayhem notwithstanding, fight club offers a chance to deconstruct and reconstruct both physicality and phenomena. With regard to Burgess's (2012) fresh utopian perspective, neither the ultimate deterioration of fight club in-universe nor the mainstream popularity of the novel and its adaptation in the real world should end the discussion. The world of *Fight Club* is stagnant and devoid of contrast, meaning that Tyler's plan inherently opposes it on the basis that it preaches perpetual progress. The reset, if successful, ought to facilitate the development of new possibilities: the loss of everything provides the freedom to do anything.

Fiske (2010) explains that there is an inherent duality in popular culture, insofar as it demonstrates vestiges of its target. Authors like Kravitz (2004) recognize these musings, yet, in their view, *Fight Club* remains duplicitous. The fact that Weber (2010) uses *Fight Club* to teach sociology may, on the surface, seem to support a cynical view of the novel as having been integrated into the very institutions its protagonists sought to undermine. However, information hazards provide a crucial counterpoint. In having her students analyze Palahniuk's novel through the lens of a particular social theorist, Weber (2010) inevitably draws their attention

to its numerous nuances. This attention hazard may thus lead to other information transfer modes previously identified in the novel: idea, data, template, signaling, and evocation hazards, as well as their many types and subtypes by effect, including commitment, information asymmetry, unveiling, recognition, and, perhaps most prominently, role model and mindset hazards.

Fight Club is riddled with true information whose dissemination can cause harm if the conditions are met. Even though the novel ultimately does not provide a model social order to replace the one under scrutiny, it retains the core idea of progress and improvement, breaking down and rebuilding with the aid of information transferred in the right manner, by the right person, to the right people, and with the right effect. As long as true information exists that may undermine the social and cultural balance of power, to evoke *Fight Club*, the survival rate of any social (dis)order can drop to zero over time, regardless of how detached from objective truth and grand narratives it purports to be.

3. Conclusion

This study has gone some way toward covering an immensely popular novel through the lens of a fairly novel classification of dangerous information. *Fight Club* is frequently criticized in the existing literature as a work of satire which does not practice what it preaches. In order to revisit those claims, the framework of information hazards was used to determine whether the novel could still disrupt the dominant culture. Despite its ubiquity, *Fight Club* contains information which has the capacity to subvert social norms in the right (wrong) hands. As such, it retains the revolutionary spirit in a more understated manner, as opposed to providing a clear-cut embrace of violence and a detailed plan for what should come after the downfall of late capitalism.

The novel utilizes all information transfer modes and contains examples of many of the types and subtypes of hazardous effects, with adversarial and risks to social organization and markets being the most pronounced. Knowledge imbalance (information asymmetry) is a consistent theme throughout, and it is reflected both in the characters' personal relationships and their positions in the wider society. Thus, knowledge becomes the currency of power, and by trading in true information and

advocating for progress over stagnation, the movement provides a counter to postmodernism, albeit a flawed one.

In conclusion, information hazards and *Fight Club* are a logical combination. Although reflecting on every incidence of an information hazard was beyond the scope of the present paper, further research could hopefully find the pairing presented herein beneficial and expand on it to sustain the conversation about *Fight Club*'s success and fidelity to social subversion.

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Received: 14 September 2025
Accepted for publication: 14 November 2025