

DMS411 Film Theory and Criticism
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Final Paper:

DAVID FINCHER: MONTAGE AND CLOSE-UP IN FIGHT CLUB

Utilizing a range of cinematic techniques, director David Fincher has fashioned the film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's impressive first novel *Fight Club* into a remarkable masterpiece of contemporary cinema. Working loosely from Jim Uhls' screenplay, Fincher made particularly proficient use of montage and close-up in filming *Fight Club* (in actuality, Uhls' screenplay does not describe any of the montage sequences that Fincher includes in the final cut of the film). Traditional montage is defined as "a series of short scenes – connected by straight cuts, dissolves or wipes – used to condense time or space" (Mascelli 138), and this most accurately describes Fincher's usage of the technique. Fincher included in his montages many close-up shots. In particular he made frequent use of extreme close-ups. The techniques were used together at significant moments in the film and propelled the story by effectively explaining certain situations and condensing periods of time to limit the necessity for more elaborate or extensive scenes. There are several instances where montage and close-up are used together that stand out because of their importance to the story.

The first example of montage comes early in the film, beginning with scene eight and lasting until scene twelve. In scene seven Edward Norton's character, Jack, is attending a support group for men with testicular cancer, at the suggestion of his doctor, in a last ditch effort to cure his insomnia. Bob, played by musician Meatloaf, chooses him

as a partner and they embrace. Bob hugs Jack tight, holding Jack's face to his chest, and it is here Jack finds solace. He cries. At the end of scene seven Jack narrates, "Babies don't sleep this well," as Fincher cuts to scene eight and the beginning of the montage sequence. The first shot is a medium shot of Jack in bed, sound asleep. He is sleeping soundly for the first time in six months. The second shot in the montage is a head and shoulders close up of Jack, facing the camera. The third shot is a point of view extreme close up of a typed list of names of support groups. The fourth shot is again a head and shoulders close up of Jack. He is reading the list. The fifth shot is a point of view medium close up of the list hanging on a bulletin board, as Jack's hand reaches in and rips it down. The sixth shot is another head and shoulder close up of Jack as he walks off camera, with the list in hand. This first portion of the montage sequence is significant because it marks Jack's realization that his insomnia stems from his lack of any emotional refuge. Trapped in an unexciting, uneventful, average lifestyle, picking out a tie everyday, going to work, coming home to a stock condominium apartment, with no wife, no girlfriend, living the life that he has been fashioned by society and the mass consumer culture to live, Jack realizes he is devoid of a real emotional existence. He has no one who cares about him and nothing into which he can deeply invest his own emotions. The attention and affection Jack receives at support groups fills that void. Jack narrates, "I became addicted." He starts going to different groups, every night of the week. The seventh shot in the montage is an extreme close up of a brochure for a tuberculosis support group. The next shot is a long shot of Jack receiving a group hug. The camera pans to reveal a poster reading "Free and Clear", another support group.

These shots demonstrate that Jack is attending more than one group. They also lead into the second half of the montage sequence.

The second half of this montage sequence begins with an extreme close up of nametags, blank and waiting to be filled out. The nametags are Jack's free pass into the lives of those he encounters in the support groups. They provide anonymity and as Jack explains, "If I didn't say anything, people always assumed the worst." Simple nametags grant Jack access to the emotional solace he so desperately seeks. The tenth shot in the montage is a close up of a coffee machine with two half empty pots of coffee present. The next shot is an extreme close up of all the amenities that supplement coffee, including paper cups, glass mugs, sugar packets and plastic stirring rods. These seemingly mundane things are symbolic of the support group stereotype. These are things you would expect to find at a support group and represent the human element that is playing such an important role for Jack. This is emphasized by the next shot, which reveals Jack and an unidentified woman hugging. The woman is crying and Jack is facing away from the camera. Fincher jump cuts to an alternate angle, showing Jack facing the camera, the woman now turned away. Jack is crying. He is releasing the pent up emotions that before he discovered the support groups, had no outlet. The fourteenth shot in the sequence is an extreme close up of a newspaper listing of support groups. A pen is visible in the shot as an unseen hand commands it to circle an ad. The next shot is a head and shoulders close up of Jack. He looks content and satisfied with his existence. This is very different from his demeanor in the first several scenes in the film, during the period of his insomnia when he looked drained, tired, and pitiful. Attending the support groups brought about the dramatic change. The sequence continues in the next shot with a close

up of a metal, electric coffee pot. Fincher jump cuts to a close up of an open box of donuts, half empty. The next shot is an extreme close up of a small basket filled with packets of tea. Again, Fincher jump cuts, this time to an extreme close up of one-dollar bills and loose change. This is the final shot in the montage sequence. In scene twelve, Jack is seated in a conference room, filled with chairs. There are only a few people present, scattered about the room, and the group's Leader is on stage, guiding the small assembly in meditation. This final portion of the montage sequence lends itself to the previous section, again showing common amenities that one would expect to find at support group meetings. The ordinariness of the items represents the ordinariness of Jack's life and the fact that they are items shared by these groups is symbolic of the fact that many people share that ordinariness. Jack is not as alone as he thinks. The mundane items also represent addiction, symbolic of Jack's addiction to attending such groups. Coffee, fast food, and money, are all *superficially* addictive to the average human being. There is nothing in their nature that is truly addicting. The addiction exists in the mind of the person who desires those things. This is also true of Jack's addiction to support groups. Support groups are not addictive by nature. The addiction exists only in Jack's mind. When combined with the fact that Jack finds solace in the suffering of others, it also suggests that his mentality may be compromised. This is further emphasized when Helena Bonham Carter's character, Marla Singer, is introduced in scene fifteen. Jack becomes jealous and resentful that she has begun to attend "his" support groups. He calls her a liar and a faker, apparently forgetting that he is in fact perpetrating the same act as she. He explains, "Her lie reflected my lie." He is upset because her presence makes him conscious of his own behavior. As a result, he again succumbs to insomnia. Jack narrates,

“I couldn’t cry. So once again, I couldn’t sleep.” The final function of this montage sequence is to condense time. The entire sequence lasts barely more than five minutes, however as Jack narrates upon confronting Marla, the sequence is supposed to reflect roughly just over a year of Jack’s life. Jack says to Marla in scene thirty-three, “These are my groups. I’ve been coming here for over a year.” Fincher used the montage sequence to condense that time and to give the viewer a very intimate and revealing look at Jack’s character and how he dealt with the dramatic transitions he faced overcoming insomnia, finding contentment, and then having it all slip away.

Jack’s behavior throughout the film becomes increasingly unstable as more and more is revealed about his mentality. This is proven in the second montage sequence in the film, which presents the first glimpse at Jack’s waning sanity, while painting a picture of his professional life. This sequence begins with scene thirty-nine and lasts until scene forty-eight. Jack has just confronted Marla, and they have worked out a system so that they will not attend the same support groups anymore. They exchange phone numbers and Marla walks away. It is at this point that Fincher begins the second montage sequence. In the first shot of the sequence, Jack is seated in an airplane, asleep. This is a head and shoulders close up and Jack is facing the camera. The plane shakes and his eyes pop open. The very next shot is again, Jack seated in an airplane, asleep. This is a different plane and shot in profile, rather than head on. Again, the plane shakes and Jack’s eyes pop open. Fincher jump cuts to the third shot in the sequence, which is a long shot of Jack, standing next to an overturned car on the side of the road. He is snapping photographs of the wreck. The fourth shot in the sequence is a medium shot of the same scene, from a different angle. Jack is unmoved by the wreck, despite the seriousness of

the damage. This demonstrates that Jack has been exposed to this type of thing so often that he has become desensitized to the tragedy of the violence involved (this is more clearly presented in scenes forty-nine and fifty, when he is inspecting the burned car in the warehouse). Fincher jump cuts to Jack, rushing toward an airport check-in counter, only to be informed that he is two hours early for check-in. The sixth shot is a medium shot of Jack as he checks his wristwatch against a large digital clock hanging on the wall of the airport terminal. These two shots together represent Jack's alienation from the world he inhabits. He can't even keep track of the time because he is constantly being pulled from one place to another by his job, which he describes as a "Recall Coordinator" for a major automotive manufacturer. His life is dictated by his career. Wherever his job requires him to travel, he travels. It is a metaphor for his existence in that Jack lacks control over the direction of his life. It is as if what happens later in the story is inevitable. There is nothing Jack can do to alter his fate. The seventh shot in the sequence is another shot of Jack waking up on an airplane, again traveling where his job commands. The eighth shot in this montage sequence is one of the most important shots in the entire film. Jack is riding an escalator when behind him, riding an escalator in the opposite direction, passes Brad Pitt's character Tyler Durden. This is significant because it is the first real glimpse of Tyler that is granted and is the best example, up to this point, of Jack's deteriorating mental state. Later on, in scene two hundred, it is revealed that Tyler is a figment of Jack's imagination. Tyler is an alternate personality that Jack has created to cope with the difficulties of his existence. Jack narrates at the moment Tyler appears on camera, "If you wake up in a different time and in a different place, can you wake up a different person?" The fact that Tyler is present in this second montage

sequence demonstrates that Jack has already developed the mental image of Tyler. Tyler is growing inside of him. At various moments throughout the first fifteen minutes of the film, Fincher inserted single frames of Tyler into the scenes. The images appeared on screen for less than a second, however were still noticeable. This is symbolic of Tyler's growth in Jack's mind. First he appears as single frames, barely visible. Then he appears as a solid image, passing randomly by on an escalator, however he does not have any dialogue. And finally, in scene fifty-one, Tyler is fully introduced as a character when he meets and speaks with Jack for the first time. The brief glimpse of Tyler on the escalator serves a dual purpose by introducing one of the main characters of the story and also acting as a step in the progression of Jack's mental degeneration.

The second half of this montage sequence is representative of the impersonal relationships Jack shares with the people and possessions he encounters during his travels. The second half begins with the ninth shot, which is Jack sitting on an airplane asleep as a female Flight Attendant pulls his seat tray down and sets a cup of coffee down in front of him, waking him up. The next shot is an extreme close up of the cup of coffee on the tray, as the Flight Attendant's hands reach into the frame to place a small creamer and a sugar packet next to the coffee. The next shot is a head and shoulders close up of Jack staring down at his tray, watching as the woman places his meal in front of him. The next shot is Jack's point of view of the tray as a chicken dinner is set before him. Neither party says a word to each other. The Flight Attendant is essentially acting as a provider for Jack. She represents the hundreds of flight attendants Jack must encounter through his work. She is serving Jack his meal, which is something a wife might do, however she and Jack share no personal relationship. They will probably never see each other again, but if

they do, chances are neither party will remember. Fincher jump cuts next to an extreme close up of a row of several hotel sized bottles of shampoo and lotion. The next shot is a medium shot of Jack, brushing his teeth in a hotel bathroom. He picks up a single Q-tip, wrapped in plastic, off of the counter and examines it with a puzzled look on his face. Fincher again jump cuts to a close up of a television set, with an in-hotel advertisement intended to inform guests of the many services available to them. The next shot is a long shot of Jack as he sits on the bed in his hotel room. The next shot is a medium shot of the same action as Jack reaches under himself realizing he has sat on a mint left on the bed. He pulls out the mint. The next shot is an extreme close up of the mint as Jack holds it, reading the label. The next shot is another close up of the television in the room, the advertisement still running. On the screen a couple is seen drinking wine. In the next shot Jack has opened the mint and tosses it in the air, catching it in his mouth, and the last shot in the sequence is again the television just as the advertisement is ending. The ad ends with a group of the hotel's staff opening their arms and exclaiming together, "Welcome!" This section of the montage sequence, as described is representative of the impersonal nature of the relationships Jack maintains as he travels. Everything is single serving, as Jack narrates, "Everywhere I traveled – tiny life. Single serving sugar. Single serving cream. Single pat of butter." He describes the people he meets on airplanes as "single serving friends" because they are friends for only the brief time they are part of his life, and then they are gone forever. This plays into the fact that he is always on the move, always living this fast paced, constantly changing lifestyle. Jack is never exposed to anything for a long enough period of time to firmly affix any real emotional value. There is nothing permanent in his life except that there is nothing permanent in his life. This

fact only perpetuates the empty feeling that plagues Jack and acts as a vacuum that drains his spirit. He has insomnia because he can't let go of the reality that his life is always the same. There is no variation, no new emotions, no new anything. This is the reason he starts to attend support groups. He wants to fill the void. This second montage sequence is also very effective at condensing time. Fincher shows Jack waking up on different planes, in different seats four times. The montage is a tool to make obvious the fact that Jack has to travel extensively for his job. The montage, no more than eight minutes in length, is meant to condense many different trips taken by Jack over an indeterminate period of time. It is also important to note that each time Jack is shown on a plane, he is shown being awakened. It is as though Jack as he is when first introduced in the film, is just the first stage in the evolution of a very different entity that is Jack at the end of the film. Jack is asleep, waiting to wake up, waiting to become that ultimate version of himself. As Jack narrated when Tyler passed him on the escalator, could he really wake up a different person? In scene forty-eight, Jack is describing some aspect of his profession with a Woman sitting beside him on a plane. However in scene fifty-one, as the plane shakes Jack opens his eyes as if he had been sleeping. Without explanation, the woman that was beside him is replaced with Tyler. This is that moment Jack spoke of, when he wakes up as a different person. This is the moment that Tyler begins to gain dominance over Jack's psyche. The second montage sequence presented all of the necessary clues to prepare for this dramatic transition in the development of Jack as a character.

There are several important transitions in the story and Fincher prepares nearly all of them with a montage sequence. One of the most important transitions in the film

comes after scene one hundred fifty six. Jack has just beaten himself up and framed his boss for the attack, blackmailing him so he could be paid and not have to come into work. Subsequent to this, Tyler had instructed the members of Fight Club to start a fight with a complete stranger and lose, as a homework assignment. Now, he is being more creative. As the members of Fight Club start to exit Tyler hands them each a small envelope. Jack explains, "Tyler dreamed up new homework assignments." It is at this point that Fincher begins a montage sequence. The first shot of this sequence is a long shot of two men destroying antennas on an apartment building rooftop. The camera pans up to reveal two more men on the roof of a building across the street, destroying other fixtures with baseball bats. Fincher jump cuts to a medium shot of the action, providing a closer look at the second pair of men. The next shot is a medium shot of three men in a video store. One of the men sets down a black bag and removes an electric extension cord, plugging it into an outlet on the wall. He then removes an electric magnet and stands. In the next shot Bob and another Fight Club member are gluing up a billboard sign. They finish and quickly move off camera. Fincher jump cuts to a long shot, revealing the billboard to be a fake public service announcement. It reads, "Did you know? You can use motor oil to fertilize your lawn. Environmental Protection Agency." The next shot is again in the video store as the man with the electric magnet runs the device along the videotapes on the shelves, sabotaging them. Fincher jump cuts to a long shot of the scene as the man progresses from one shelf to the next, destroying the tapes. The next shot is an extreme close up of an electric drill removing a nut from a bolt on a spiked tire barrier. The next shot is an extreme close up of the barrier being lifted and flipped around. The next shot reveals the reversed barrier being put back in place. Again the next shot is an extreme

close up, this time of the nut being placed back on the bolt and in the next shot the drill is used to tighten the nut. The last shot in this sequence reveals Jack and Tyler to be the people reversing the barrier. Tyler holds open a small bag while Jack places the electric drill inside. The two exit the scene and the camera pans up to reveal a warning sign that reads “Wrong Way. Do Not Enter.” At this point the montage sequence ends. This sequence is important because it marks the emergence of the violence of Fight Club out of the basements and into the open. Increasingly violent acts of vandalism mark this sequence as members of Fight Club destroy public property in progressively more dramatic examples of bravado. The full importance of this sequence is not fully realized however, unless it is considered in conjunction with a second montage sequence, which follows it and provides a more concrete example of this pattern of increasing violence.

In the scene following the end of this sequence, Tyler and Jack are walking away from the barrier they just reversed and use baseball bats to smack random cars parked along the curb and set off the airbags inside. It is also during this scene that a limousine crosses the barrier. Sparks burst out from underneath the vehicle as all four tires are slashed and the wheels scrape along the street. This scene segues into the next montage sequence. This second sequence begins with a medium shot of two men on a rooftop next to a car dealership. The men are feeding laxatives to a mass of pigeons. The second shot in the sequence is an extreme close up of the hood of a car, covered in pigeon dung. The next shot is a close up of the windshield of another car, also covered in pigeon dung. Fincher jump cuts to a long shot of an entire row of cars parked in the dealership lot, all covered with pigeon dung. The next shot is a close up of a box cutter being used to open a box and the sixth shot in the sequence is a close up of that box from overhead as it is

opened, revealing a stack of airline safety manuals inside. These manuals however, have been altered. The next two shots are extreme close ups of one of the manuals. The diagrams depict passengers panicking, screaming and trying to escape from flames. This is in reference to the first conversation Tyler and Jack had with each other. Tyler explained how the oxygen supplied in emergencies intoxicates the passengers. He said, "Oxygen gets you high. In a catastrophic emergency you're taking huge, panicked breaths. Suddenly you become euphoric. Docile. You accept your fate." Tyler pointed out the airline safety manual in the seat in front of Jack. The passengers in the diagrams were calm. Tyler arranges the printing of new manuals to more accurately reflect how people might act in a real emergency. The ninth shot in the sequence reveals a Man removing copies of the manual from the box and in the next shot, placing them into the pockets behind the seats. The next shot is a close up of scissors cutting a newspaper. From that Fincher jump cuts to a medium close up of Tyler concentrating on clipping articles. The next shot is an extreme close up of one of the articles Tyler has clipped. The headline reads "Police Seize Excrement Catapult." In the next shot Tyler is again clipping from a newspaper. The next shot is an extreme close up of the article as Tyler cuts around it. The headline reads "Performance Artist Molested". In the sixteenth shot of the sequence, Tyler reacts to reading the article with a smirk, holding a cigarette in his lips. In the next shot he removes the cigarette and exhales a puff of smoke. The eighteenth shot of this montage sequence is an extreme close up of a bulletin board, where several articles that Tyler has clipped are hanging. The camera pans, revealing three articles with the headlines "Power Outage at Local Mall", "Fountain Befouled", and "Missing Monkeys Found Shaved". The newspaper articles are evidence of the extent to which Fight Club

has spread. What began with acts of isolated vandalism has spread into widespread acts of vandalism, kidnapping, and violence and the final four shots in this sequence demonstrate the most dramatic and most violent action yet. The first of the four shots is a close up of an electric drill drilling a hole into the top of a computer monitor. The second shot is a long shot from the outside looking in through the display window of a computer store, revealing several men performing this action. The third shot is a close up of a funnel being placed into the hole that was just drilled, and gasoline being poured into the funnel. The final shot is again a long shot from outside, as the men make their getaway. In a later scene the reason for this action is demonstrated when the power to the display is switched on and the display explodes with a massive ball of fire. This sequence, when considered in conjunction with the sequence preceding it, firmly reveals an increasing pattern of violence. This pattern is representative of Jack's own internal struggle with his emotional demons. In the beginning of the story Jack bottled up his emotions if for no other reason than he had nothing else to do with them. This is the stage where Tyler is flashed for less than a second, barely visible. This is also akin to the first stage of Fight Club. Jack dealt with his problems one on one, just as in Fight Club only two men are allowed to fight in any given match. Jack then began to attend the support groups, making his emotional instability apparent to a select public. This is analogous to the second stage of Fight Club when the small isolated acts of vandalism and violence granted the public access to Fight Club, and this is equal to the point at which Tyler passes on the escalator. No dialogue, no interaction with Jack, but rather just a glimpse at the inevitable. However, just as Jack used nametags bearing false identities to maintain his anonymity, the members of Fight Club wear masks and act under cover of darkness to

protect the secrecy of their group. And in the same manner that Jack's mental degeneration progressed to a crucial climax, *Fight Club* also progresses to a dramatic and dramatic climax. Jack's climax came when Tyler finally became a dominant entity in his world. That first meeting on the airplane was the moment that Jack lost control over his reality. This is equivalent to the explosion in the computer store that ends the fourth montage sequence. *Fight Club* has reached an explosive climax and the nature of that pinnacle, violent and brutal, offers little hope that things can return to the way they were before the action. Just like reaching a mountain peak. There is nowhere to go but down. Jack can no longer return to his original state. The moment Tyler exploded into his life Jack was changed irreversibly and his fate was locked. When Tyler and Jack reversed the tire barrier, the action was symbolic of Jack's mental change. One direction provides a smooth ride, but as soon as an irreversible change is presented there is no way to attempt to return without encountering severe tire damage, severe consequences. Fincher again uses these montage sequences to also condense time. From the first meeting of *Fight Club* through to the explosion in the computer store, a few months have passed. The two montage sequences Fincher uses to represent this period of time however, last no longer than ten minutes. The montage sequences are effective in representing the remarkable transitions *Fight Club* experiences over an extensive period of time, in short and concise progressions of carefully structured shots.

In David Fincher's *Fight Club*, montage plays a very important role. In conjunction with Fincher's extensive use of various types of close up shots, the two techniques create beautiful sequences that not only condense time when necessary, but also represent significant transitional moments in the story. The montage sequences

propel the story and provide profound insight into the development of the main character and narrator, Jack. Ironically, the montage sequences also provide profound insight into the deterioration of Jack's character. Fincher pulls no punches with his fiercely bold direction of Jim Uhls screenplay adaptation of *Fight Club*. He made skillful use of myriad cinematic techniques in crafting a uniquely inspired film. Together, these techniques were extremely effective at bringing Chuck Palahniuk's powerful novel to striking, stylized life.

Works Cited:

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Works Consulted:

1. *Fight Club* Motion Picture. Directed by David Fincher. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1999.
2. *Fight Club* Screenplay. Written by Jim Uhls, 1998.